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CAPTAIN DICK TALBOT, KING OF THE ROAD;

Or, The Black-Hoods of Shasta.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "THE SPOTTER DETECTIVE," "THE NEW YORK SHARP," "OVERLAND KIT," "INJUN DICK," ETC., ETC.



"SHUT OFF STEAM OR YOU'RE A DEAD MAN!" THE LEADER CRIED, RIDING UP TO THE CAB AND "COVERING" THE ENGINEER WITH HIS WEAPON.

Captain Dick Talbot, KING OF THE ROAD;

OR,
The Black-hoods of Shasta.

A wild story of life in the Cinnabar Valley; of the men who tell—the men who rob—and the men who kill; of the hunted and the hunters; weird as the pines of the wild Western land, strange as the men who people the hills and valleys over which great Shasta rules.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "OVERLAND KIT," "ROCKY MOUNTAIN BOB," "KENTUCK, THE SPORT," "INJUN DICK," "VELVET HAND," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE LEAGUE UNTO DEATH.

DARK were the shadows resting in the deep vales near to the great peak of Shasta; the moon, rising slowly, was just appearing above the diadem of eternal snow with which the great mountain monarch of northern California is always crowned. Afar off shone the lights of Cinnabar, the little mining town, with whose fortunes the readers of the strange life of Richard Talbot, as depicted in the stories of "Kentuck" and "Injun Dick" are so well acquainted.

All was still and dark, for the moon, just beginning to appear above the peak of Shasta, had not yet attained altitude enough to light up the entire mountain side.

It was near the witching hour of midnight, and the lights of Cinnabar were slowly beginning to disappear, dropping from sight, one by one, like so many falling stars.

No sound or sign of life was there, either human, bird or beast, on that side of the old mountain peak which fronted toward the mining town, and any belated traveler, journeying along the narrow trail in the vale below, would, gazing upward at the dark and somber mountain-side, have shuddered at the funeral-like appearance. But now, as the last light of Cinnabar faded into nothingness and darkness reigned supreme in the vales below, suddenly, on Shasta's side, half-way up, a little tongue of flame shot into the air, cutting the murky darkness of the night.

Whence came that flame, and who was it that thus in the "dead waste and middle of the night" kept watch and ward on great Shasta's side?

The tongue of fire burned on a narrow ledge, twenty or thirty feet square, near the winding way by means of which a sure-footed traveler could proceed nearly to the crest of the mountain.

A small quantity of brush had been heaped together in the center of the ledge, and the match applied.

By the fire stood a stalwart form; black as night the ebon locks that floated loosely down upon his shoulders, red as the virgin copper fresh from the mother lode, was his dusky face; clad was he in the garb of the wilderness, the buck-skin shirt and leggings, the gayly-trimmed moccasins, the feather-plumed head-dress, but no Californian Indian was the chief; no brave of the Shasta tribe; no dusky warrior of the red McClouds; no chief of any of the semi-civilized Californian tribes could boast the inches and the muscular gifts of this perfect specimen of a man.

A chief of the great Blackfoot nation was he, the masters of the upper Missouri. No stranger the man to those who have in the printed pages followed the career of Injun Dick; O-wa-he he was called, or, to give him the title by which he was more commonly known, Mud-turtle, the red brother of the desperate white chief who waged such a terrible fight against such unequalled odds for the control of the Cinnabar mine.

The chief stood with folded arms gazing down into the valley, evidently on the watch.

The beacon light had been kindled as a signal, and the savage waited for a comrade.

Not long had he to wait, for soon to the quick ears of the Indian came the sound of a footstep upon the mountain-side, and then from the dark shadows of the pines below came a human form; a man just about the medium height, dressed in semi-Mexican fashion like a herdsman from the lower plains. A gaudy Spanish serapé was cast over his shoulder; he was armed to the teeth, a repeating rifle slung on his back, a brace of revolvers hung to the belt of untanned leather which girded in his waist, through which also was thrust a heavy twelve-inch bladed bowie-knife.

As the man came within the circle of light his features appeared plain and distinct. No Mexican was he, although arrayed somewhat like one; the clear brown eyes, keen enough to gaze, full-orbed, at the noonday sun, the firm-set, resolute mouth, the peculiar expression of daring which sat so becomingly upon his face;

the look which once seen was not apt to be forgotten, revealed that the new comer was the famous man whose name will live forever in the annals of California, Dick Talbot.

"How!" exclaimed the chief, as Talbot advanced into the circle of light cast by the fire, and he extended his hand which Talbot grasped warmly.

"Sit, chief," said Dick, motioning him toward a convenient bowlder, "for I have much to say to you."

"Mud-turtle open ears like the wolf when the tread of the buffalo rings upon the prairie," the Indian replied, drawing his blanket around him, and then he squatted down like a huge toad upon the rock.

"Chief, you and I have seen some tough times together," Dick remarked.

"You bet," responded the brave, laconically.

"You know that the price of a thousand dollars is set upon my head?"

"Too little," the Indian observed, with a grave shake of the head, "Mud-turtle no sell his head for ten times the dust."

"You are quite right there!" Talbot replied, laughing. "I shouldn't care to trade for any sum. Well, just as long as there is a price set upon my head, I am in danger. I've been thinking over the matter, and in order to give you an idea of the plan that I have formed, I arranged this meeting to-night. I am attached to this valley and to this old mountain, despite the dangers that I have encountered hereabouts: it seems more like home to me than any other place that I know of in this world. I don't like this skulking about under an assumed name as if I was afraid of my own shadow. I want to walk once again with head erect in the sunlight, fearing no man."

The Indian nodded; he sympathized with the speaker.

"Now, then, I have a scheme in my head, by means of which I think I can make my peace with the great State of California, and if they are willing to call it square, I'm sure I am," Talbot continued.

"Hush!" cried the chief, suddenly; his quick ears had detected a sound in the valley below.

Talbot listened, and soon he understood the reason of the Indian's caution.

Some one was ascending the mountain trail, not cautiously, with stealthy steps, but boldly and openly.

"Some wanderer attracted by the light of our fire," Dick observed.

And then the mountain breeze bore to their ears the fragment of a rude song chanted by the stranger.

"Oh, rack-back Davy cutting up a shine,
Gal with the red ha'r kicking up behind!"

Talbot had heard the words before, but spoken by another voice; but, as it was, he thought he recognized the singer.

So also had the Indian, for he grinned from ear to ear.

"Hilleol come, boy, come!" yelled the new-comer, as he approached the fire, his voice coarse and husky. "Don't shoot, for I'm a man w'at's safe to tie to! All I need is food and fire, rest for my boss, and a good pull at the whisky-jug, if you can spare a dram to the squarest white man that there is in all this hyer Golden State."

Fat was the stranger, greasy and in rags, but he was still the same irrepressible bummer as in the halcyon days of yore; there was no discount on the original Joe Bowers.

"Kin I believe me eyes?" he cried, striking an attitude as he recognized the two men by the fire. "Ducats will I lay that it is, and if it isn't may I be jiggered and kicked to death by crippled mules! the gay old King of Shasta, D. Talbot, esquire, and my esteemed red buck, which I love like a brother, M. Turtle. Say, boys, for the love of heaven! have you got a drop of whisky?"

Talbot produced a flask and the bummer took a long and eager "pull" at it.

"Ah! that's the stuff!" he cried, drawing a long breath. "That hits me whar I live! Well, my gay and festive cusses, why have we met thus by moonlight alone? What's up, my tulips? Is this a tragedy or 'the posey of a ring? Say, sports, I'm clean busted—all broke up, and I want a stake. I've been obliged to hoof it clear from 'way down below, 'case in a leetle game of poker a couple of aces happened to slip up my sleeve, and they were a-gwine to hang me, dod rot 'em; they were gwine to make the real original ole Joe Bowers stretch a rope and smell hemp, but my legs were never brought up to see my body abused, and I just giv' 'em leg-bail; you couldn't see my heels for dust!"

"Bowers, you're the very man I want, but can I trust you?" Talbot replied.

"Trust me! with uncounted gold, my lord duke, and that's the kind of man that I am!" the bummer cried, theatrically.

"Would you like a pardon from the State for all offenses committed in the past?"

"A clean bill of health! I bet yer!"

"Make him sign with blood!" exclaimed the chief, who evidently doubted the bummer.

"Sartin—I'm agreeable." What could daunt the heart of Bowers?

It was the old Indian fashion. Men sealed brotherhood with drops of blood upon the blade of a knife.

Talbot and the Indian rose and joined Bowers by the fire. Mud-turtle cast aside his heavy blanket and baring his muscular, sinewy right arm, pricked the flesh with the point of the knife and allowed three drops of blood to fall upon the glistening blade. The others did the same.

"Brothers all in life or death!" cried the Indian: "Maybe we live—maybe we die—no matter, two fight for one, one fight for two!"

"Agreed!" cried Talbot.

"We swar!" exclaimed Bowers, melodramatically.

And so the league was formed.

CHAPTER II.

THE KING OF THE ROAD.

MAC ILVAINE still kept the half-way house as in the old days when the White Rider, the dreaded Death Shot of Shasta, with his never-failing rifle carried dismay through the Shasta valley.

The express-coach from Yreka made its usual halt there one morning for change of horses and for breakfast, and the driver, a red-whiskered Irishman, known far and wide as Red Micky McGee—the name bestowed on account of his fiery-colored hair and beard—threw the reins to the hostler, and, descending from the box, jerked his finger over his shoulder in the direction of the coach and remarked to the keeper of the ranch:

"Quality there to-day, bedad!"

"Who is it?" the Scotchman queried.

"Sorra a wan of me knows, but it's one of them big-bugs, for this is an extra stage put on expressly for him, do ye mind? The regular is three hours behind me."

Interested by this statement the ranch keeper hastened to assist the traveler to alight—a piece of courtesy not often vouchsafed, for in the wild Californian land it is each man for himself and Satan for them all.

The solitary passenger was a portly, well-preserved man of forty-five or fifty, well-dressed, and evidently a person of mark.

He made a hearty breakfast, accepted the attentions of the ranch-keeper like a man used to such things, and while the fresh horses were being harnessed engaged the Scotchman in conversation.

"Do you have much trouble on this route with the road-agents?" he inquired.

"Oh, yes; once in a while they come down on the coaches and 'go through' the passengers and the express matter."

"Well, don't the officers try to hunt them down?"

"Yes, but the fellows are very well acquainted with all the mountain passes, and then, too, they seem to be informed of all the plans that are laid to entrap them, for when a decoy coach is sent out, they never trouble it."

"Whose gang is it?"

"They call themselves the Black-hoods."

"The Black-hoods! Well, that is a rather peculiar title."

"Yes, sir; it is because they conceal their faces with a sort of a black hood, and all you can see of them is their eyes."

"A good disguise to prevent recognition, and I suppose that that is the object?"

"Yes, sir; they're a bold set of rascals, and they don't hesitate to shed blood if any resistance is offered."

"Oh, the passengers do resist sometimes?"

"Yes, sir; but the road-agents are always too much for 'em."

"Who is the reputed leader of the band?"

"As to that, nobody knows, although I have heard two or three of the old-timers, who have known all about the valley since the first settlement, say that it looks like the work of Injun Dick."

"Injun Dick," observed the gentleman, thoughtfully; "that's Dick Talbot, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"There's an old reward of a thousand dollars offered for him, isn't there?"

"I believe that there is, and all I've got to say about that is, that the man who gets the money will have to earn it. I, for one, don't hanker after the job."

"Dick Talbot—let me see! he was mixed up with the Cinnabar mine once, wasn't he?" said the gentleman, evidently troubled.

"Yes, I believe he was."

"I thought that he was declared to be dead?"

"So I heard, but they say that he ain't."

"I've come up here on a little bit of business connected with the Cinnabar property, but if Talbot is alive it will be risky business for any one to touch it."

"I reckon so," the Scotchman responded, with a wise shake of the head.

"All aboard!" sung out the driver, and the gentleman again entered the coach.

The driver cracked his whip and off they started. The half-way ranch was soon left behind; the team made good time, and the coach soon rolled into the long, dark canyon which the White Rider had once selected for the scene of one of his exploits.

It was not a pleasant place, and the passenger, gazing from the windows of the hack, reflected upon what an excellent location it was for a road-agent attack.

Red Mickey upon the box drove on without a thought of such a thing, for he did not think that there was the slightest danger of an attack, as the robbers rarely troubled an inward-bound coach unless crowded with passengers.

But the idle thoughts of the stranger were destined to come nearer the truth that day than the experienced wisdom of the driver, for, as the coach passed the lowest point of the canyon and commenced to ascend, out from behind a bowlder stepped two men, rifle in hand, their faces concealed by black masks, and leveling their weapons they commanded a halt.

"Drop your reins, throw up your hands, and surrender!" was the stern order given.

Mickey had been through this sort of thing two or three times before, and, as he always said, he was too much of a gentleman to attempt to dispute with such polite fellows.

Therefore he reined his horses in instantly and nodded good-naturedly to the mask.

"Don't be after troublin' yerselves to fire, gentlemen," he remarked; "a wink is as good as a nod to a blind horse, but it's wasting time, ye are, this morning."

The passenger stuck his head out of the window to see what was the matter, and at once caught sight of the masked men advancing toward the vehicle.

"Hallo, hallo!" he muttered; "instead of my finding them, they have found me."

A third man now came from behind a rock close to the side of the coach, a cocked revolver in his hand, threatening death in the event of resistance.

But the passenger hadn't any idea of showing fight.

"Don't fire, sir; I do not intend to offer resistance," he hastened to exclaim.

These were not the Black-hoods, but another gang it was evident, for their faces were simply masked by craps.

"No harm is intended you, sir, nor are we in search of your valuables, if you have any on your person," the new-comer replied. He was evidently the chief. "If you will have the kindness to alight and give me some ten minutes of your time, I shall hold it a favor."

"Really, sir, you are so persuasive that I find it impossible to refuse compliance with your request," the gentleman answered with a grimace and a glance at the cocked revolver.

"I will not detain you long, sir," said the outlaw with courteous politeness, opening the door so that the other could descend from the coach. "Now, drive on, and wait at the top of the hill," he commanded, addressing the driver.

Amazed at the strange scene, but understanding that he had better comply, the driver obeyed.

As the coach disappeared up the hill the road-agent began the conversation:

"Now, in the first place, allow me to introduce myself, for although I know you well enough, yet you do not know me. My name is Richard Talbot, better known, perhaps, as Injun Dick."

The gentleman started, and an expression of alarm appeared upon his face.

"Do not fear; I mean no harm to you, although some years ago you were so eager to make my acquaintance that you offered a reward of a thousand dollars for me; but I never was worth such a sum as that, and that is the reason why the reward never was claimed. I know, too, sir, that apart from your mission here to devise some means to hunt down the road-agents who infest northern California, you have some idea of investing in the old Cinnabar mine, the mine that I once swore never should be worked by mortal man. But, that's all over now, but take my advice and don't put your money in the Cinnabar property, for the lode is played out, and you'll sink more money in the mine than you will ever take out of it. But, now, setting these matters aside, I've got a proposition to make to you. With the aid of your sheriffs and police, you will never be able to exterminate the road-agents. This band of Black-hoods have their head-quarters in the very town of Cinnabar. The man who destroys the band must become one of them; he must go right into the tiger's den and take the beast by the throat. I am tired of the reputation which year by year grows upon and clings around my name. I am a hunted man—an outlaw, with a price fixed upon my head, but that is no reason why every foul deed that is done in the Shasta valley should be charged to my score. I am not one-tenth part as bad as the world at large believes me to be. Now, I want a chance to redeem myself. I'll make a bargain with you; give me a free pardon for myself and two associates, for all deeds done in the past, and I will agree to ferret out and hunt down every band of outlaws that sets the law at defiance within this State."

"By heaven! Talbot, you're a bold, brave fellow, and I'll accept your offer!" the other exclaimed, quickly.

"Mind you, I ask for nothing until the work is accomplished. Give me a simple safeguard for

three months, so that I may be secure against arrest while I am pursuing my task, and if within the three months I do not either bring to justice, or kill with my own hand, every one of these Black-hoods, from the highest to the lowest, then will I leave this golden land, never to return."

"It is a bargain; but how will you get the safeguard?"

"I will call upon you in Cinnabar, for it is in that town that I must lay my snares to entrap these outlaws who laugh at all the efforts of the regular authorities."

"I will prepare it for you the moment I reach the town."

"Adieu then, until to-night, and don't put your money in the Cinnabar. That mine is accursed and never brought good luck to any one." Talbot whistled shrilly as a warning to his men, and in a twinkling the masked men disappeared behind the rocks, and the coach was free to proceed on its way.

CHAPTER III.

NIC OF THE BELLA UNION.

CINNABAR CITY had got to be quite a place; the city boasted nearly a thousand inhabitants, and in the outlying mining camps, tributary to the town, there were fully two thousand more. The diggings were rich, easily worked, did not require expensive machinery, and therefore it was just the place for poor men without much capital.

The Occidental was still the leading hotel of the town, although it was pretty hard run by a new place, quite elaborately built, with fluted columns in front, after the style of a Greek temple, known as the White House, named after the home of our nation's ruler in Washington.

But the really popular resort of the town was a drinking saloon and variety theater combined, known as the Bella Union, after the well-known place of amusement in Frisco.

The rate of admission to this temple of song and wine was one that generally pleased the public at large, entrance being free, gratis, for nothing, as the miners generally expressed it.

It was quite a large saloon, fitted up with the usual bar, and in addition some rude benches for the accommodation of the audience, among which small tables were placed so that the patrons could enjoy their liquor at the same time that they took in the performance, which was given on a little stage, hardly bigger than a good-sized table, which had been constructed at one end of the room.

To tell the exact truth, the "artists" who gave the performance were about on a par with the rate of admission charged; yet a man ought not to grumble at a gift-horse, and, to do the miners justice, they did not, but always applauded right heartily, although some merry soul, when well soaked in liquor, would sometimes volunteer advice to the performers which was laughable in the extreme; but this was all taken as a matter of course, for the "artists" were even of a lower grade than the roughs who sat in front and guzzled the beer, and therefore were well seasoned to ribaldry.

The bright, particular star of the Bella Union was a dashing, black-eyed, black-haired girl, rather handsome in her personal appearance, despite the boldness that her public life had fastened upon her. She was about the medium height, well formed, a tolerably pleasing singer and an excellent dancer—two accomplishments greatly in favor with the patrons of the saloon.

Mademoiselle Nicola she was called; French she pretended to be, although some of her brother performers spitefully remarked that the slight accent that marked her speech was more Irish than French.

But this clearly had its rise in envy, for Mademoiselle Nicola received more salary from the proprietor of the saloon than all the rest of the performers put together.

And, strange as it may appear in regard to a woman following such a life, and gaining her bread in such a vile den, the breath of scandal touched her not—that is, with any justice, for of course strangers believed that she was far from being pure; but those who knew her—and as she had been in Cinnabar some three months, quite a number had managed to make her acquaintance—knew that any attempt at love-making was instantly repulsed with scorn, and the girl was not particular in regard to the language she used, either, for she always spoke her mind freely, and as, from the life she followed, the slang of the streets far more often reached her ears than the polite terms of good society, her expressions were far more forcible than elegant.

Some moon-struck miner, young and green, visiting the saloon, would be struck by the beauty of the singing-girl, and of course naturally concluding from the style of the place that the inmates couldn't amount to much, would think that all he had to do was to wait for the girl after the performance, pour his tale of love into her ears, shake his buck-skin bag of gold-dust in her face, and lead her away with him a willing captive.

Great would be the astonishment of the

youth, then, to have his proposals rejected in utter scorn.

"It's played out!" the singing-girl would ejaculate, in contempt. "Go put your head in soak; you're a first-class fraud, and I'll have you run out of town if you come round bothering me."

On two or three occasions the discomfited suitor, being rather the worse for liquor, had attempted by main force to avenge the disparaging words, and had advanced with the intention of kissing the pouting lips of the beauty until she took back her words, but the girl had always been equal to the occasion, and as the man attempted to grasp her, had planted a pretty little silver-mounted six-shooter right under his nose with the emphatic exclamation:

"Now, you git!"

And like the robber famed in the California classics, the astonished man generally cried, "You bet!" and departed, a wiser if not a better man.

And so it came to be a proverb in the Cinnabar region: "Keep your hands off of the Bella Union beauty if you ain't anxious to start a graveyard! Nic will shoot on sight if you provoke her!"

All the performers in the Bella Union resided in the building, and this fact saved the girl from a great deal of annoyance, as she was not compelled to pass through the street on her way to and home from the performance.

On the evening of the day which witnessed the remarkable interview between Talbot and the unknown gentleman, who apparently stood high in power in California, just as the shades of the night commenced to fall thick and heavy, and the lights to glimmer from the windows in the town, a lady and gentleman came out of the express-office, which was in the same building as the post-office, and walked slowly up the street.

The lady was a new-comer in Cinnabar. She and her father had taken up their abode in the city about a month previous to the time of which we write.

The father was a man well in years, rather slender and delicate in appearance, and extremely retired in his habits. He gave his name as Joscelin Daily, and the girl was called Cassandra Daily.

She was a lovely creature, one of the kind that men go wild about, being tall, beautifully formed, with exquisitely cut features; great blue eyes, a peach-like complexion, and the most magnificent golden hair. She had a beautiful voice, perfect music in its tones, and was as graceful a woman as had ever walked the streets of the mining town.

In fact the traveled men of Cinnabar declared that it would be difficult to find a lady to surpass her in all the big cities of the East.

There was a little bit of mystery about Daily that rather provoked the curiosity of the idle gossips of the town. He had given out on his arrival in Cinnabar that he was in search of mining property, and of course he was at once set down as a man of means; but as day after day passed and he did not seem to trouble himself to look at any mines, but spent the time in the seclusion of the little house which he had hired, coming out only at night, like an owl, and always spending the evening in the card-rooms of the hotels, where he played and played largely and always successfully, people began to whisper that he was much more of a gambler than a speculator, and his search for mines was all a pretense to disguise his real occupation.

But no one thought any the worse of the old gentleman on account of this fact. On the Pacific slope almost every one plays more or less, and the gambler there is not altogether debarred from the society of decent people.

The gentleman who accompanied Miss Daily, in the early evening above referred to, a tall, well-built, muscular man, with a brownish beard, a nose curved like an eagle's beak, restless gray eyes, and a peculiar whitish-yellow complexion, was one of the most prominent men in the town, being the express-agent, postmaster and the local banker, and, in addition, interested in two or three mining ventures. He was called Archibald Brockford.

Naturally, from the nature of his offices, he was brought in contact with all strangers much more than any one else in the town, and so he had become quite well acquainted with the father and daughter.

Like all men of his type, bold and daring, reckless of all obstacles that intervened between him and the end he sought, the moment he became acquainted with Miss Daily he became satisfied that she was exactly the kind of girl he wanted for a wife, and so at once proceeded to lay siege to her.

For a while the girl received his attentions without the slightest suspicion of the truth, and was very grateful indeed to the stranger who was doing so much to make her stay in the wild mountain region agreeable; but suddenly his manner became so marked that it was impossible for her to misunderstand his meaning, and then she endeavored by coldness and restraint to throw a damper upon his passion.

But Brockford was one of the full-headed men who never allow any unfavorable signs to influence them in the least, and on this occasion,

despite the evident coolness of the girl, who had called for a letter, he had persisted in accompanying her up the street.

"Oh, it's no trouble!" he had exclaimed, when she attempted to decline his escort. "I was just going up your way," and so he walked along with her.

The girl, annoyed, with an angry red spot burning in each cheek, marched along in silence, striving to avoid conversation as much as possible.

Brockford, totally ignorant, man of the world though he was, of one phase of woman's nature, ascribed her shyness to maidenly modesty, and had no idea that a little feeling of hatred was beginning to grow up in the heart of the girl toward him.

And neither one of the two had any suspicion that a female form closely cloaked in a dark water-proof was stealing along behind them, keeping with them step by step, or that a woman's little hand grasping the butt of a toy-like revolver was trembling with rage, and that it required all the self-control of the owner to keep her from doing deadly harm to one of the two.

Brockford saw Miss Dally to her home, parted with her at the gate with a bow, in which more assurance than respect was visible, and then turning to retrace his steps a gleam of exultation upon his not unhandsome features, he came face to face with the watching woman, who was no other than Nic of the Bella Union!

CHAPTER IV.

THE FAITH OF A POLITICIAN.

AFTER the abrupt disappearance of the road-agents, the portly gentleman walked toward the coach in a very peculiar state of mind.

The interview had been so sudden—so unexpected, so totally unthought of, that the stranger was really dazed for a few moments.

"Hang the fellow!" he muttered, as he proceeded toward the coach, Red Mickey upon the box watching him with a great deal of curiosity; "I hardly know what to make of the affair."

"Yer not hurted, sur?" the driver exclaimed. "Oh, no."

"Did the gentleman go through yees?" and Mickey grinned at the idea.

"No, he merely wanted to have a talk with me, that was all. I am a stranger in these parts, you know, and he wanted, I presume, to offer me the hospitalities of the region."

"Bad 'cess to me if I want their hospitalities!" Mickey exclaimed, gathering up the reins as the passenger reentered the coach. "Faix! the man that dines with them ginerally has a leaden pill to ate, with a slice or two of cold steel for dessert."

Again the coach went on its way, and in due time, without any incident occurring worthy of mention, deposited its passenger at the Occidental Hotel.

In front of the hotel stood the sheriff of the county, a big, brown-bearded man, almost a giant in size, Billy Dancer by name, and reputed to be the ablest officer that had ever filled his official position.

He was evidently in waiting for the solitary passenger, for he at once advanced to the coach and opening the door proceeded, with the greatest politeness possible, to assist the gentleman to alight.

"I'm on hand, you see," he remarked. "Hope you have had a pleasant journey, your—"

"Smith!" interrupted the new-comer, abruptly. "Smith, that's my name, you understand?"

"Oh, yes," replied the sheriff, with a knowing wink. "I understand like a book! I reckon that you don't have to kick me many times afore I feel it!"

"Have you had a room prepared for me as I requested?"

"Yes, sir-ee!" exclaimed Dancer, emphatically; "the best apartment that the shebang affords; right on the second floor thar; looking out onto the street, so that you'll be able to see all that's goin' on, and I tell you, your—"

"Smith!" exclaimed the other, sharply.

"In course! as I was a-sayin', Mr. Smith, you won't find any town in the North that kin hold a candle to this lively burg."

"No doubt—no doubt! it looks like a lively place," the stranger remarked, with a glance up and down the street.

"Oh, it's jest a-rushin' along, I tell yer!"

"Will you have the kindness to come up to my room? I've had quite an adventure on the way, and I want to speak to you about it."

"Sart'in," the sheriff replied.

The stranger walked into the hotel, registered his name in a round, bold hand:

"A. B. Smith, San Francisco, Cal."

The sheriff nodded to the clerk and remarked:

"This is the gent I spoke to you about, Johnny."

And the short-haired young man who "run" the office of the hotel at once expressed the great pleasure it afforded him to make the acquaintance of the gentleman from Frisco; marked the number of the room assigned to the stranger opposite to his name on the book; observed that traveling was dry work, and that the old Mexican saying that, "it was a long time between drinks," was an extremely true one, and conveyed much meaning in few words;

and at once invited the sheriff and the Frisco man to take something. Johnny Reid was bar-keeper as well as clerk.

The new-comer was graciously pleased to comply, and the sheriff remarked that he was too well brought up to insult any man by declining to drink with him, and so the three tipped their glasses simultaneously, observed, "Here goes," swallowed their poison, as Dancer facetiously remarked, and then "Mr. Smith" and the sheriff proceeded up-stairs.

The apartments assigned to the Frisco gentleman were the best that the Occidental boasted, the main one being a room about twelve by twelve on the second floor, with two windows looking out on the main street, and a smaller apartment, which served as a bedroom, adjoining.

The rooms were tolerably well furnished, and the stranger looked about him with an air of satisfaction.

"We these are not bad quarters," he observed.

"Oh, no, I reckon that we kin make a man feel to jam up in this hyer neck of the woods," Dancer remarked, complacently.

"Sit down, I've had quite an adventure," the other remarked, taking possession of a rocking-chair, while the sheriff deposited his huge limbs on the sofa, much to the endangerment of that frail piece of furniture, which had never been calculated to afford accommodation to a man of Dancer's weight.

"Yes, sir, quite an adventure," the stranger repeated.

The sheriff signified that he was all ears, and Mr. Smith at once proceeded to relate all the particulars of the interview between himself and the masked road-agent.

Dancer listened in utter astonishment.

"Thunder!" he exclaimed, in profound amazement, after the other had finished his recital, "why I had no idea that Dick Talbot was in the land of the living!"

"You know the man then?"

"No, only by reputation; he flourished hyer afore my time."

"But you know of him?"

"Oh, yes, he's a regular hero in these hyer regions; he's a mighty plucky, desperate fellow, if only half the stories they tell about him are true. Why, according to the yarns the miners spin, he thought nothing of fighting a dozen men single-handed."

"So I have heard," the other remarked, thoughtfully.

"But I reckoned that the cuss was dead; everybody thinks so anyway round about hyer; he ain't been seen in these diggings for years."

"The man that I saw to-day was lively enough," Mr. Smith remarked, dryly.

"A healthy old corpus, eh?"

"Yes, very healthy."

"Well, what are you a-goin' to do about it?"

"On that point I am undecided," the other answered, slowly. "I will own that it goes against my grain to make any bargain with the fellow."

"That's so! I kin understand that," the sheriff observed, with a sagacious nod. "If it was me I'd a heap rather take him red-handed and make him stretch hemp than to bargain with him and let him off; that's my platform!"

"He makes a pretty fair offer though," Smith said, reflectively.

"To ketch the road-agents, eh? But kin he do it?"

"No road-agents, no pardon!" the other replied, tersely.

"That's so, but how do you know that he ain't the leader of the Black-hoods, and, maybe, thar's one or two, or three in the band that he don't like—that may be kinder kicking against him, you know, and this offer of his'n is jest a trick to get the soreheads in trouble and at the same time get a pardon for himself and two or three others that hang with him?"

"I'd like to hang them!" cried Smith, abruptly, and with a great deal of anger in his tones. In fact, the more the man from Frisco reflected upon his interview with the masked man in the canyon, the more he felt annoyed at the affair. The outlaw had boldly placed himself upon a level with him and to proceeded treat as with an equal power.

The impudence of the fellow annoyed him.

"I'll tell you what it is, your—Mister Smith!" exclaimed Dancer, suddenly. "Let's call in Archy Brockford; he's the postmaster and express-agent, and a mighty smart man of business, too, and what he don't know about a thing of this sort ain't worth knowing. I'll bet a thousand dollars to a cent that he will be able to give good advice upon the subject."

"Yes, I've heard of Brockford, although I have never met him," Smith observed. "I think that it will be a good idea."

And so a messenger was at once dispatched for Brockford, and when he arrived a long and earnest consultation took place between the three, and the result of that consultation the reader will see anon.

The day wore away, and when night came, after supper was over, the stranger sought the hotel clerk and told him that he expected a caller that evening, and that if any one came and in-

quired for the gentleman who came in that morning on the extra stage to send him at once up to his room.

The clerk replied that he would do so; Mr. Smith then ascended to his room once more, and it was quite evident from his manner that he was in a state of great mental excitement.

About eight o'clock that evening a roughly-dressed man, looking like a miner fresh from the mountains, with a rough, stubby beard upon a chin that plainly had not felt the edge of a razor for some time, and long hair dangling in tangled locks down over his shoulders, lounged into the office and inquired of the clerk if a gentleman had arrived by an extra coach that morning.

"Room 3, first floor, turn to the left, second door on the right after you turn," responded the official, and the man at once proceeded up-stairs.

He reached the door, knocked, and was invited to enter.

Smith looked in astonishment at his uncouth visitor; this was not the style of man that he expected to see at all.

"Well, sir, what do you want?" he asked, presuming that he was a messenger sent by Talbot, who had concluded not to risk his precious person within the limits of the town of Cinnabar.

"I come by appointment," responded the man, and the voice made the Frisco gentleman stare.

"Hallo! is it possible that you are Dick Talbot?" he exclaimed.

"That is what I'm called."

"Then in that case you are my prisoner!" cried the other, quickly, and with the word the door leading into the bedroom sprung ajar, revealing the sheriff with four or five men, the door into the entry also opened and Brockford with three or four more armed followers appeared. Each and every man was armed with rifle or revolver, and a dozen weapons threatened the life of Injun Dick.

CHAPTER V.

DEFIANCE UNTO DEATH.

"Don't attempt to move or you are a dead man!" cried the stranger, jumping to his feet—he had been sitting in the rocking-chair—evidently greatly excited.

With a look of surprise upon his features, but without exhibiting any sign of terror, Talbot—for this rough-looking miner was indeed the renowned Injun Dick, skillfully disguised—gazed upon the leveled weapons.

"See hyer, Governor," he said, slowly, "ain't you made a mistake? This hyer leetle surpris ain't according to our agreement at all."

"No mistake about it!" cried the individual addressed, who was indeed no less a person than the Governor of the State of California. "You are a red-handed outlaw with a price set upon your head, and it is the duty of every honest man in the State to apprehend you upon sight."

"Oh, and the safe-conduct that you promised me was merely a pretense to get me into your power," Talbot remarked, as cool and composed as though a dozen weapons were not threatening his life.

"Yes, that is it, exactly," replied the official, in triumph.

"And your plighted word—your promise of safety?"

"Any man is perfectly justified in breaking faith with any such villain as you are!"

"You didn't talk that way in the canyon to-day."

"Ah, you had the advantage then, and you were a fool not to improve it!" the Governor replied. "Now it is my turn!"

"Why, you are the biggest rascal that I have ever seen!" exclaimed Talbot, in an icy tone, that cut home like a knife.

The Governor turned pale and then red.

"You infernal scoundrel! don't you attempt to move!" the official shouted. "Don't attempt to resist or to draw a weapon, or I'll have you riddled with balls. You have defied the power of the land long enough, but your defiance of justice has ended now. From this room you go to jail, and from the jail to a scaffold."

"I reckon that the hemp isn't twisted that will hang me!" Talbot retorted.

"We'll see about that!" the Governor cried, defiantly. "Handcuff him, sheriff; don't give him a chance to escape; remember that you answer for him with your life!"

"Oh, don't be afraid, your excellency!" Dancer responded, coming forward and dangling a pair of handcuffs significantly in his hand; "I'll stick to him tighter'n a leech, you bet!"

"You had better have me put where I can be safely kept," Talbot suggested, quietly, as he submitted his wrists to the steel bracelets, which were much more remarkable for strength than elegance.

"What do you mean, you villain?" blustered the ruler of the State.

"Why, that I've got an account to settle with you now, and there isn't a prison in California strong enough to hold me until that account is reckoned up!"

There wasn't a bit of bravado about the way in which the threat was uttered, but the Governor trembled to his very marrow; nevertheless, the reputation of the speaker made it almost

certain that, if it lay within the compass of human power, he would be as good as his word.

The politician was not renowned for courage, but, although he trembled, he endeavored to conceal his fears beneath a blustering air.

"Don't trouble your head about future vengeance!" he exclaimed. "The best thing that you can do is to make your peace with the world as soon as possible, for the chances are a hundred to one that you haven't got more than a week's life in you. I've got you safe, now, and I'm going to get rid of you just as I would of any bloody-minded, destructive wolf. I'm going to railroad you right out of this world! You are the leader of these Black-hoods, and I'm going to strike terror into the hearts of all these road-agents, by your fate!"

"You are a villainous liar!" cried Talbot, calmly, his eyes flashing; "a cowardly cur without either faith or honor. You have warned me, and now I'll warn you: get out of the Shasta valley as soon as you can, for, though I may be powerless, there are other hands to strike in my behalf. You were not wise to entrap me singly; there are two more whom you should have captured, and while they are at liberty you are in danger, no matter how safe the jail in which you lock me up! But, I shall get out; it is only a question of time, and then, no matter what I have done in the past, I will make the State of California regret this vile, treacherous, Judas-like act of yours. You have chosen war, and you shall have it until you cry for peace!"

"I'll come and see you hang," responded the Governor, brutally, with an attempt to ape the coolness of the other, but, in reality, he was trembling in his heart, the craven that he was.

"I s'pose the funeral had better be moving," the sheriff suggested.

"Take him away, and see that he is watched day and night until the day of his execution arrives!" the Governor commanded. "Remember, sheriff, I shall hold you responsible for his safe-keeping!"

"All correct!" that individual cried; "I reckon that I know my duty and kin fulfill it as well as any man in the State. I say, old feller!" he added, familiarly, slapping the prisoner on the back, "it was me and Archy Brockford thar that put up this little job on you. We knowed that as you was allers a man of your word, you wouldn't be apt to believe that the Governor would think that everything was fair in war and go for you."

"I'm very much obliged for the information," Talbot replied, "and if I am lucky enough to escape the hempen necktie that you are all so eager to fasten around my neck, I'll be sure to remember your kindness."

The crowd looked at each other dubiously; nearly all had heard of Injun Dick and knew something of the man's reputation, for still the stories of his daring deeds during the early history of the town were current, but not one of them all fully realized what the man could do when urged to full exertion.

The armed men surrounded the prisoner, and the sheriff took his place by his side.

"Shoot him down like a dog if he attempts to escape," was the parting command of the Governor.

"You bet!" the sheriff replied.

Down the stairs, through the hotel office, into the street, went the procession.

By one of those mysterious chances which so often occur and which are so hard to explain, the rumor had got abroad that something unusual was taking place in the Occidental, and quite a little crowd had congregated in and around the hotel, and as the prisoner and his escort passed into the street the curiosity of the throng became intense.

"Who is he? What has he done?"

Eager poured the questions upon the sheriff, for no one recognized the captive. A new class of citizens had taken possession of the town since the days when the Cinnabar Mine was in its glory; and even if some of the old-timers had lingered, and, forming part of the crowd, had gazed upon the manacled man in curiosity, the chances are a hundred to one that they would not have recognized, in the rough-looking fellow, with the hat slouched down over his eyes, the trim and gentlemanly Dick Talbot.

The secret was too good to keep, and the sheriff could not resist the impulse to shine as the hero of the hour.

"It's Dick Talbot—Injun Dick!" he exclaimed. "Thar's a reward of a thousand dollars offered for him, dead or alive, and we've just salivated him!"

Quickly then the word flew from mouth to mouth.

Talbot—Injun Dick—the Death Shot of Shasta, was in the hands of the law! and as the little procession passed down the street the eager crowd pressed close to the officers, curious to get a look at the prisoner, and when the party arrived at the jail the throng became so great as to block up the door and to prevent the officers from gaining admission.

"Come, come, boys; g'n us room for to get in!" the sheriff cried.

And then, taking advantage of the halt and the confusion that occurred thereby, a loud-talk-

ing individual, who had been making himself quite conspicuous among the crowd, during the march down the street, by denouncing Talbot in the fiercest manner, and urging upon the throng the advisability of saving the officers of the law some trouble by lynching the prisoner on the spot, managed to enlist some half-drunken vagabonds on his side, and with a loud yell of "Lynch him—hang him—run him up!" the party charged upon the knot of armed men who surrounded the prisoner. The leader of the party flourished a six-shooter in each hand, and as he led the mob on he opened fire, intending, of course, as every one believed, to take the life of Talbot; but, somehow, the bullets flew among the armed men, who, in rage, returned the fire, forgetting their prisoner, and for a few minutes a pretty lively little street-fight ensued.

The leader of the mob incontinently vanished the moment the officers showed fight, disappearing most mysteriously from the fray, and the mob, lacking in leadership, soon gave way and fled in hot haste; but when the sheriff, having repulsed the attack, and finally got the doors of the jail open, turned to push his prisoner in, lo, and behold, Talbot had disappeared.

He had taken advantage of the confusion of the attack to slip through the line of officers and mingle with the crowd.

Too late the sheriff realized that the lynch attack was but a clever ruse on the part of Talbot's confederates to create confusion, so that in the hubbub he might escape.

And the plan had succeeded admirably, too, and although Dancer, mad with rage, searched the city up and down, nowhere within the limits of Cinnabar could he discover the missing man, bold Injun Dick.

That night there were three uneasy men within the town—Dancer, the sheriff; Brockford, the postmaster; and the astute and unprincipled politician, who, by skillful maneuvering, had managed to gain the Governor's chair.

Talbot free meant danger to them all!

A handbill was at once struck off and posted around the town, offering two thousand dollars reward for Talbot's capture, alive or dead; but when the morning came Cinnabar saw another sight—a second handbill posted by the side of the first, denouncing the Governor by name as a liar and a coward, and offering a reward of one cent to any one who would kick him out of the city, and it was boldly signed Dick Talbot. He had "posted" the politician!

CHAPTER VI.

PLAIN WORDS.

To say that Brockford was astonished by the sudden appearance of the woman would be to mildly state the facts of the case, for the big, burly man, with all his polished dignity and wonderful strength of nerve, upon which he prided himself, became flustered and nervous as he came so unexpectedly face to face with the girl.

Nic was "mad," the fact was plainly apparent in her features, and her bright black eyes flashed with unwonted fire as she gazed full in the face of the express-agent.

"Howdy do!" she exclaimed, shortly; "you are kinder surprised, ain't you? Be more surprised, too, you bet, before I get through with you!"

By this time, with a wonderful effort, the man had in part recovered his composure.

"Hallo, Nic, is that you?" he said, carelessly. "Why, you quite surprised me by jumping out in the way you did. You ought not to come any of your theatrical tricks on me!"

"Tain't a theatrical trick!" replied the girl, sharply, "and you've got no call to say anything against the theater-folks; they are a heap sight better than you are anyway, you black-hearted villain!"

"Oh, if you are going to talk in this way I'll be much obliged if you'll get out of the path and let me go on about my business." And the man made a movement as if to push her out of the way, but the girl started back and drawing the little silver-mounted revolver, the pretty toy, her constant companion, leveled it full at his breast, cocking it as she did so.

To use the old phrase, germane to the matter and to the plain discourse, she had "the drop" on him and Brockford realized it at once. She was too far away for him to seize her, and he was well enough acquainted with the girl to understand that the slightest motion on his part, tending toward an attack upon her, would cause her to fire as surely as the night succeeds the day.

For a moment the postmaster turned pale and caught his breath quickly. Like many another big and burly man he was not game to the backbone, but when cornered was more inclined to show the white feather than to brave the peril to the last extremity.

"Don't you move a step or I'll plug you!" Nic cried, desperation in both voice and face. The girl had seen too many personal altercations since her advent in the north not to be well-posted in the usual force and emphatic exclamations indulged in by the miners on such occasions.

"Hold on—hold on; don't be hasty!" Brock-

ford exclaimed, in a husky voice. "What on earth is the matter with you?"

"What on earth is the matter with you?" the girl replied. "I haven't been honored by a visit from your lordship for a week, and I really began to believe that you had quite forgotten that such an unfortunate little inn as Nic of the Bella Union ever existed, and so I thought that I would recall myself to your memory."

"Oh, I've been busy, and—"

"You've got tired of me, eh?" cried the girl, sharply, finishing the sentence for him.

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes!" and Nic mimicked his tone to perfection. "You needn't think that you can pull the wool over my eyes. It can't be done! I'm up to snuff, I am! You don't see anything green in my eyes, you bet! You've found out that you can't make a fool of me and so you're off on a new lead. Who is the girl, anyway?"

"Girl!" and Brockford attempted to look astonished, but the effort was a sorry failure and Nic sneered in contempt.

"Yes, girl! She ain't an old woman, or you wouldn't be after her; you can bet ducats on that! But, I say, when are you going to keep the promise that you made to me in Frisco?"

"Promise?" and again the express-agent tried to look surprised.

"Yes, promise," and the girl emphasized the word with a little motion of the revolver which fairly brought the heart of the bold Brockford up in his mouth.

"For heaven's sake be careful!" he exclaimed; "if you should happen to discharge that pistol the chances are ten to one that you would either kill or maim me for life."

"Oh, I should kill you, sure!" the girl replied, coolly. "I know where to hit and I've been practicing at a target for a week now so as to get in trim to settle you!"

"To settle me!" the express-agent fairly gasped.

"You bet your life on that!" the little vixen exclaimed, defiantly. "Oh, I ain't the kind of hair-pin that can be fooled with with impunity. You're the man that brought me up here and now I want you to make good your word!"

"My dear girl, will you listen to reason?"

"Nary reason! you're too big a liar!" answered Nic, promptly. "You see I know you now, and I wouldn't believe a word you might say. I've got you in a tight place and I mean to make you settle with me!"

"Settle! of course, certainly!" cried Brockford, eagerly catching at the chance; "but put up your revolver and talk sense. There is no use of letting the whole town know all about our business."

It was just dusk, and although the two were standing right in the public street, yet it was in an out-of-the-way part of the town, little frequented.

"I ain't anxious to let anybody know my business, neither do I care if all the world knows it!" the girl responded, with an imperious toss of her little head.

"Well, what do you want?"

"You've gone back on me!"

"Supposing that I have? A man changes his mind sometimes," he answered, sulkily.

"Then you ain't a-going to marry me?"

"To marry you?" and Brockford looked blank indeed.

"Yes, that is what you promised when you made my acquaintance in Frisco."

"Oh, no, you misunderstood me; I said that I would look out and take care of you."

"Oh, no, the misunderstanding was on your part," the girl retorted, significantly. "You took me for a fool and that's where you made a mistake; I took you for a flat and that's where I made a mistake. There's nothing soft about you, either head or heart. I thought that you were dead-gone on me—you see, I'm going to talk right plain—and like a fool I imagined that I could do what I liked with you; and so when you come after me in Frisco and told me what a big man you was up in this hyer town of Cinnabar, and how much money you made and how much you thought of me, I reckoned that it was going to be the chance of my life; I thought that I had struck a rich husband, for sure, and so I told you that some time I would come to Cinnabar, for the manager of the show here has been after me ever so long to come and work for him. But now that I am here I find that we were both mistaken; you are not a flat and I am not a fool, but I'm going for satisfaction, anyway! Now then you've either got to marry me or pay for trifling with my feelings."

"Why not call the matter square as it is?" he suggested.

"Oh, you're like all the rest of the men, mean as can be when you've an object in view!" she exclaimed, in contempt. "But, I'm going to show you that there is one girl in the world who won't stand any nonsense. Here I've kept myself single just for your sake and refused ever so many nice offers. Why, a pilgrim from the mountains laid himself and fourteen gold mines—to say nothing of silver lodes that he claimed—at my feet only last night, but from his appearance I reckoned that he hadn't

struck pay-dirt very rich yet. You have blighted my young affections and I'm going for you, red-hot! You can't throw me overboard and run after another girl in this here way without putting up the checks for it. Maybe you think that I don't know the lady, eh? Oh, what a precious little fool you must take me to be! Wasn't I mad though when I saw that you was a-shining up to her! Why, it was as much as I could do to keep from popping at you both! But I've got my plan of operations all arranged. Either you settle with me or I'll just march up to Miss Cassy Daily and tell her just how you have deceived and trifled with me. Oh, my! won't it make those big blue eyes of hers stick out when she discovers that you have been running after any such a poor little wretch as I am!"

For a moment Brockford glared at the girl in almost speechless anger. He had seen enough of Cassandra Daily to know that such a disclosure would be pretty certain to be the death-blow to all his hopes, and this little minx was resolutely in earnest, too, and at present he saw no way to avoid the difficulty except by complying with her demands. It chafed him terribly to be caught in such a trap, but he had only his own folly to blame. Like the majority of mankind he thought that all theater-girls were alike, and that a few ounces of gold would buy any one of them.

"Don't do that," he said, slowly; "I will do anything in reason. What do you want?"

"Blest if I know!" Nic responded, in that reckless manner which sat so becomingly upon her small person. "I must take time to reflect upon the matter. The fact is, I haven't had time to think what I ought to demand, or how much you ought to pay. When a man trifles with the feelings of such a nice young girl as I am he ought to pay pretty well for it. I had a mind to pop at you on sight, I was so mad when I found that you were a-running after this other gorgeous creature, and she's a lily-bird for sure! But I suppose that I had better not make a fool of myself; I give you fair warning though if you don't settle with me then I shall feel obligated to open Miss Cassy's eyes as to the kind of man you are!"

"Well, take time to think the matter over, and when you make up your mind as to what you think you ought to have, call on me and I guess we can settle the matter, but don't act nastily."

"All right! If you are inclined to act reasonably you will find me the nicest little woman in the world to get along with. I'll call round in a day or two and let you know what I think about the matter; ta-ta!"

And then kissing the tips of her fingers to him in mockery she glided away up the street, leaving the express-agent a prey to the most unbounded rage.

"The infernal little spitfire!" he cried, in anger, shaking his fist after the retreating figure. "I had no idea that she would dare to threaten me, but her game was to play her trump-cards at once; by holding back she gives me a chance to provide against them. She'll warn Cassy, will she? By Heaven! if she is living and in this town three days from this night then she will be a luckier woman and I a bigger blunderer than I think for!" And as Brockford walked slowly up the street he began to plot dark schemes against the dashing Bella Union beauty.

CHAPTER VII.

A DARING DEED.

LITTLE by little during the past few years the Iron Horse has been advancing northward and southward along the Pacific slope, his shrill scream waking the echoes of the hills and valleys, and his glistening trail shining like silver in the sunbeams.

As far as the town of Reading in the north the Oregon branch of the Central Pacific has extended, and there connects with stage lines running clear through to Portland, Oregon.

At the time of which we write the road had just reached Reading, and only one train a day was running each way, a mixed train, freight and passenger; a single coach—more caboose than passenger-car—afforded all the accommodation needed by the traveling public.

The train was scheduled to leave Reading at 1:30 A. M., or on the arrival of the stages from the north, and as the time of the road was extremely slow the train generally waited an hour or so for the stages when they were late, which was usually about every other day in the bad season of the year when the roads were cut up.

Just two days after the events related in the preceding chapters had taken place, the train booked to leave Reading at 1:30 was waiting for the stages, which had not yet arrived although they had been due for about an hour.

The train was an extremely light one: an engine, tender, express-car and a single passenger coach.

The conductor, sauntering along the platform, was accosted by the engineer from the window of his cab.

"They are late to-night," he said, referring to the stages.

"Yes, but I expect them every moment."

"Not much stuff down to-night."

"No, but we've got a good deal of Wells and Fargo's dust aboard, and I expect that the stages will bring in a good pile more."

"Do you know, Cap," said the engineer, reflectively, "that I've been thinking what a good haul some of these road-agent chaps would make if they was to go for the train some time when the express company has a heavy shipment on board?"

"That would be a risky job," the conductor replied.

"Easy enough to stop the train by piling up obstructions on the track; the road ain't over safe as it is. I've been expecting to get into the ditch ever since we commenced running, and it's really wonderful that we haven't had a smash-up, for the roadbed is in terrible bad order."

"Oh, it would be easy enough to stop the train, but it would take a big party of them to overpower the passengers, for we generally have twenty or thirty men aboard, and about every man is well armed and used to handling weapons; so you see, unless the road-agents came in strong force the passengers would be apt to beat 'em off."

"If they should fight," replied the engineer, in his dry way, "and I reckon that the chances are just as great that they wouldn't fight as that they would."

"Maybe so; there's no telling; you'd fight of course!"

"Oh yes, you bet! Of course I'd fight for Wells and Fargo's old monopoly that has been robbing the miners by wholesale ever since it started. No, sir! I'm down on all these big, overgrown monopolies! Jest you let any polite gentleman point a six-shooter at my head and see how quick, like Captain Scott's 'coon, I'll come down. If the express company want men to fight for their valuables they had better hire 'em; they can't ring me in, no way they kin fix it!"

The rumble of the stages at that moment interrupted the conversation.

"Hallo! there they are now!"

"We'll be nearly two hours late, and this is a gay old road to make up time on, even if we ain't scheduled to make more than fifteen miles an hour," the engineer grumbled.

The stages deposited their passengers; the express-messengers got their gold-dust on board and locked it up securely in the small iron safe in the express-car.

A pretty rich cargo the safe carried that day; ten to fifteen thousand dollars worth of gold.

The passengers, some twenty in number, all men, not a female among them, took their seats in the car, the express-messenger got on the train, the conductor gave the customary warning "All aboard," waved his lantern and the train pulled out for Red Bluffs, the next station on the line southward.

The train was due at Red Bluffs at 5:10, and the engineer, as he drove along in the darkness of the night, calculated that he could make up an hour of the lost time easily enough, and that would bring the train to the next stopping-place at 6:10, a little less than an hour behind the schedule.

It was a light train, the engine was working well, and as the gray light of the morning began to lighten up the eastern skies and render visible the surrounding objects, the engineer saw that his calculation was a good one, and that the train would surely make up an hour by the time Red Bluffs was reached.

When the light grew strong and the sun began to rise the engineer consulted his watch. It was exactly 5:30, and the station was only ten miles away.

"We'll make it!" he exclaimed.

Then the train plunged into a cut, tore round a curve, and after the curve emerged into a small rolling prairie.

The engineer, with his hand on the throttle and his eyes keeping watch out ahead after his usual fashion, saw a sight on the track ahead that made him stare. A barricade of rocks and timber had been built right on the pathway of the iron horse, so that any attempt to run the engine over the obstruction would most surely result in the wrecking of the train.

"The road-agents, by jingo!" cried the engineer, shutting off steam for dear life and considerably astonished at finding his calculations regarding these masters of the highway so soon fulfilled, and at the same time he reversed his engine.

The train was under good headway, running at the rate of twenty odd miles an hour, and as the engineer had perceived the obstructions in time he saw that he would be able to stop before the barricade was reached.

Not a soul was in sight, although the engineer nothing doubted that the little clumps of timber situated near the track were full of the outlaws.

The engineer had whistled for "down brakes," the moment he discovered that there was a design to wreck the train, and the astonished brakeman—the train only boasted one—in wonder sprung to his post.

"I reckon that that's a heap of 'em in the timber, Jim," the engineer exclaimed to the fire-

man, who occupied the cab of the locomotive with him.

"You bet!"

"S'pose I play 'em a trick even if I do risk a bullet, we kin dodge down in the cab?"

"Go ahead, old man!"

"As she begins to slow up, the engine is reversed, and as soon as possible I'll let her have all she will take, and you stand ready with a stick or two of wood to heave at 'em if they attempt to board us. If we kin get fairly started on the back-track, I reckon that we kin soon run away from 'em, and I'd risk a shot or two jest for fun."

"All right, I'm with you!"

The fireman prepared his sticks of wood, selecting small ones that he could throw easily, no bad weapons either for such an emergency as this, for a lick from one of them would be morally certain to knock a man over as flat as a pancake.

The engineer, with his hands on the lever, was ready to try the trick which his experienced mind had suggested as likely to baffle the outlaws in their attempt to seize the train, instigated thereto by the pure love of mischief. And the passengers, warned by the whistles that something out of the common run was at hand, stuck their heads out of the windows in wonder and amazement.

Slower and slower grew the motion.

Not a soul appeared in sight.

"We shall make it, sure!" the engineer exclaimed in glee, but also trembling with excitement.

The wheels were whirling round in one direction, the train proceeding in the other. The moment the train came to a stop, naturally she would at once proceed to retreat.

The motion almost ceased—the critical moment was at hand; another minute and the train speeding backward toward the north could afford to laugh at the baffled road-agents, when out from the clump of timber rode three mounted men, dressed completely in buckskin suits, mounted on powerful horses, two of them armed with repeating-rifles; the third, who was evidently the leader of the three, bore a heavy revolver in his hand, and a repeating-rifle lay across the pommel of his saddle.

"Shut off steam or you're a dead man!" he cried, riding right up to the cab and "covering" the engineer with his weapon.

There was no mistaking the meaning of the man. If ever mortal meant what he said, he did.

The engineer just looked for a moment in the eye of the glistening tube, and then, like a wise man, made his choice.

"I 'pass,' pardner!" he cried, and, at the same time, obeyed the command.

"Count me out too!" exclaimed the fireman, dropping the billet of wood which he had clutched in his hands, ready to repel boarders.

The faces of all three of the strangers were covered with red masks from underneath which floated dark and heavy beards, but yet there was one of the riders who bestrode his horse in a manner that surely a white man never did.

"Come down out of the engine," commanded the masked man, "unfasten the coupling between the express and passenger-car, then run your engine clear up to the barricade, and remain there until I give you further orders. Don't attempt any tricks or we will be obliged to make it unpleasant for you."

"It's your say so, sir," responded the engineer, politely, and he at once proceeded to comply with the request.

The engine and express-car were detached and run up the road, thus completely destroying all chance of escape.

"Now, then, if the Governor of California is on board of this train, I shall be very much obliged indeed if he will have the politeness to come forward and show himself!" the road-agent leader said.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN ASTONISHING CAPTURE.

THE passengers were staring through the windows, and a few of them on the platforms, but not a man of them all had as yet drawn a weapon. The conductor was standing on the forward platform, just a little anxious in regard to the matter, for he hadn't any idea how the thing was going to end.

One of the road-agents had accompanied the engine and express-car down the road and with ready rifle kept guard upon the engineer and fireman. The other two had ridden up to the train, and with cocked weapons kept vigilant watch for the slightest sign of resistance.

As we have said, although the majority of the passengers of the train were armed, not one of them betrayed any idea of showing fight, although they outnumbered, with the train men, the outlaws eight to one.

"Will the Governor of California, who, I believe, is on board of the train, have the kindness to step out and show himself?" the road-agent leader said, in the sweetest and most polite of tones. "I want to see him, I, Richard Talbot, sometimes called the Death Shot of Shasta."

And at this speech the passengers stared at

each other with amazed eyes. Was the Governor of California indeed a passenger on board of the train, and if so, where was he?

The particulars of the strange capture, and still stranger escape of Talbot, were known to nearly all of the travelers, for news of this kind travels fast in the mountain region, and is eagerly carried from town to town, and from camp to camp; and, therefore, knowing the share that the Governor had taken in the capture of the noted Injun Dick, his urgent desire to interview the ruler of the great State of California did not surprise them.

Talbot was a man of his word; he had told the official that he would be even with him for that night's work in the Occidental Hotel, and he intended to keep the promise.

Not one of the passengers stirred, and Talbot's keen eyes flashed fire through the holes of the mask.

"Well, gentlemen, I must trouble you to get out of that car and lay down your weapons on the ground as you alight," he said; "and don't be alarmed; I don't intend to rob you of a single article, not even of your weapons. I merely deprive you of them, lest some one of you might be rash enough to provoke a conflict. I am terribly in earnest in this matter, gentlemen; to use an old Californian saying, I mean business, every time! The Governor I believe to be on this train, and I want him."

It was an extremely simple speech, but there was a vast amount of threatening meaning in it.

"Now, gentlemen, let us understand each other," Talbot continued. "In the first place I mean no harm to any passenger, one man alone excepted. I'm not after your valuables or your money, although I reckon I may be obliged to borrow a few ounces of gold-dust from my esteemed friends Wells, Fargo & Co.; but as they are rich, and make plenty of money with their monopoly, out of the hard-working miners, they can afford to accommodate me. I want no blood upon my hands, and therefore I warn you all against offering any resistance, for I am now a desperate man. The law has declared me an outlaw and set a price upon my head; worse than the law declares I am, I cannot be; therefore I am reckless as to consequences. Those of you who have ever heard of me know that I am reputed to be a dead-shot, a man who never misses his aim, and I now give you all fair warning that at the first hostile sign displayed I will open fire."

This was no idle threat, and there wasn't a man within hearing who did not believe that the speaker would be as good as his word.

"Mr. Talbot, I reckon that this game is yours," remarked the conductor, getting off the platform as he spoke and beginning to "shuck" himself of his weapons, as a Westerner might remark.

A six-shooter and a five-inch bladed bowie-knife were the carnal weapons of the conductor, and with a flourish he deposited them on the ground.

"Come, gentlemen, show your hands," he remarked, facetiously.

The passengers obeyed promptly, nearly every one of them indulging in some joking observation, for now that the "pilgrims" were relieved of the apprehension of personal danger to themselves and the fear of parting with their treasures, they looked upon the affair in the light of a deuced good joke.

"And now, gentlemen," said Talbot, as the disarming operation progressed, "if you will have the kindness to march out yonder to that little clump of trees and sit down while I see how much wealth the express company has got in their strong box, I shall be much obliged to you; but, where is the conductor?" he questioned, abruptly, as the last passenger filed out of the car; he had kept close watch upon the men, but had not been gratified by the appearance of the distinguished official whom he was so anxious to see.

"Hyer I am," responded that worthy, stepping forward.

"I thought that the Governor was on board of your train."

"Not to my knowledge."

"You know him?"

"Oh, yes; by sight."

"And he is not on board?"

"No, sir."

"Maybe he thinks that he can get out of the country without meeting me," Talbot observed, slyly annoyed by his failure to capture the scheming politician, "but if he does he will be smarter than I think he is."

After the last passenger emerged from the car, deposited his weapons and marched off to join the rest under the tree, Talbot commanded:

"Jaybird, look out for these gentlemen!"

The second road-agent, who had remained by the side of the leader of the band, and who was short and stout in stature, nodded his head, galloped off, and took post within easy pistol-range of the men under the trees, his ready-cocked rifle in his hand, ready for instant service.

The passengers thus disposed of, Talbot turned his attention to the express-car, but, as he put his horse in motion to ride up to it, some passengers appeared upon the scene.

Over the rolling prairie swells came a little

troop of horsemen, six in number. They were all clad alike, in blue, and the rays of the rising sun shimmered and gleamed upon the polished steel barrels of the weapons they carried.

It was a detachment of troops, United States cavalry, on the march.

A corporal rode at the head of the squad, and they came leisurely on, their horses moving at a jog-trot, totally unsuspecting of danger.

They had noticed the train, but had no idea of the cause of its stoppage.

Talbot's resolve was soon taken, and the move he made was a wonderful surprise to all—for not a soul that witnessed this strange scene but imagined that the instant they discovered the soldiers were approaching, the road-agents would immediately put spurs to their horses and flee from the wrath to come.

But the lookers-on did not know Dick Talbot.

Exasperated by the vile treatment that he had received at the hands of the Governor, he had determined to strike a blow which should show to all California that the blood of the Death Shot of Shasta had not yet turned to water in his veins.

And so as the soldiers came riding quietly on, he uttered a single warning; "Let no man dare to speak under pain of instant death!" and then, putting spurs to his steed he rode directly toward the advancing troop, bending down in the saddle, as if he was employed in arranging it, and thus concealing his masked face from the gaze of the soldiers behind his horse's head; then, when he got within fair pistol-range he suddenly sat upright, halting his well-trained horse at the same moment, and leveling his rifle full at the troop.

"Halt! Surrender, and throw down your arms!" he cried.

Never in all this world were there men more astonished.

The carbines of the soldiers were slung across their backs, their revolvers in their holsters, their sabers safe in the scabbards.

They were six to one, but that one with a cocked and leveled rifle held them at his mercy—in the hollow of his hand.

They stared, amazed and bewildered.

A single motion looking toward resistance and one and all knew that the death-dealing rifle-ball would hurtle through the air.

True it could kill but one—or perhaps if the rider was quick he might fire two or three shots before they could get ready to offer battle, but not a man of the troop was willing to risk the chance that the bullet of the road-agent might not find a billet in his own person.

And therefore they surrendered.

Six well-armed soldiers surrendered to one single resolute, desperate man.

Think not, gentle reader, that we are dealing in fiction when we relate this wonderful capture, for it is the truth, as related in the columns of all the prominent Californian journals at the time.

The soldiers dismounted, laid down their arms in a heap on the plain, hopped their horses to gether in obedience to the commands of their captor, and then marched off and joined the passengers sitting under the trees.

Then Talbot turned his attention to the express-car. The messenger, who had been peeping through the half-opened door, had had an idea of showing fight, but as Dick rode up, his trusty rifle in his hand, he concluded that discretion was the better part of valor and so surrendered, and, forced by the menacing weapon of the attacker, yielded up the keys of the safe.

The strong box open and the dust at the mercy of Talbot, he selected what he wanted, whistled as a signal to the other two, they galloped up, put the bags of gold-dust into their saddle-bags and then rode off, Talbot waving an adieu.

"Good-by, boys! See you again, some time, so-long!" he cried.

CHAPTER IX.

THE GOVERNOR'S TRAP.

NATURALLY the news of Injun Dick's bold attack upon the railroad train excited all the Northern Californian region to a great degree. As we have said, such news travels fast, and it did not take long for all the particulars of the daring deed to reach even the Oregon line, and great was the wonder that the attack excited.

Amid the lonely mines in the mountain gulches, in the saloons of the camps, wherever two or more men met together, about the first thing that one of them was sure to say, was: "Pardner, did you hear tell how Injun Dick Talbot went for the railroad train, and snatched it bald-headed?"

Never before had any single incident since Northern California was Northern California so occupied the public attention.

And the Governor of the State, who had tarried in Cinnabar City, although he had intended to proceed southward on the very train that Talbot and his men had waylaid, being detained by a desire which arose in his mind at the very last minute to examine carefully into the condition of the Cinnabar mine property in which he had some thoughts of investing—and investing quite largely, too—was both amazed and astounded when he learned all the particulars of the bold attack.

And he began to get nervous, for Madam Rumor, with her thousand tongues, had not neglected to embellish the recital of the wonderful outrage with sundry flights of fancy.

As the story ran, Captain Dick Talbot had assailed the train with no other purpose than to settle his quarrel with the Governor of the State, and had placed his rifle right at the head of a passenger, who somewhat resembled the ruler of the Golden State in personal appearance, and would have slain him outright in cold blood, despite the piteous appeals of the victim for mercy, but for the assurance given by the rest of the passengers that he was not the party that the outlaw supposed him to be.

Then, the tale further related that Talbot had sworn, with a fearful oath, that he would have the heart's blood of the politician if he had to follow him clean to Sacramento and slay him on the very steps of the capitol itself.

Little wonder that the official, who was not constitutionally a brave man, should feel annoyed and alarmed at all these threatening reports.

He sent at once for Archibald Brockford, at whose instigation he had journeyed to Cinnabar City, for it was Brockford, keen and sharp in speculation, who had suggested the idea of reviving the fallen fortunes of the Cinnabar property.

Brockford came at once and he found the Governor enjoying his breakfast, in his private parlor.

"Sit down, sit down!" exclaimed the official as the postmaster entered, "sit down and help yourself to a cup of coffee; have you had your breakfast?"

"Yes, thank you, I'm an early bird," the express-agent replied, helping himself to a chair, as he spoke.

"Have you heard the news about this Talbot?"

"Yes; a pretty bold attack."

"And the fellow threatens my life, too!"

"Barking dogs seldom bite," replied Brockford, laconically.

The official brightened up a little.

"Aha! you don't think there is any great danger, then?"

"Oh, no! I don't doubt the fellow would give a good deal and venture pretty rashly to be able to get square with you for the little trick you played him, but if you take the proper precautions I don't think there will be much danger of his harming you. You go armed, of course."

"Yes, but hang it! the chances are a hundred to one that I should be no match for this desperado in a hand-to-hand encounter."

"In fact, you are not hankering after a difficulty," Brockford observed, with a laugh.

"No, sir, I am not," the Governor replied, decidedly. "But if this fellow makes his words good I won't be able to get out of this infernal country without having a row with him."

"So I heard it reported, but you can't always believe all you hear, you know."

"And, of course, now that Talbot has appeared again, I suppose there is no use of figuring on the Cinnabar property any more."

Brockford looked surprised.

"Why, Governor, you won't let this outlaw frighten you out of that speculation, will you?"

"Confound it, man!" the Governor exclaimed testily, "do you suppose I'm going to not only risk my money but my life?"

"Well, as far as that goes, the fellow has got it in for you now, for all that you're worth," the other remarked, sagely. "And if I was you, now that the rascal has declared war, I should go in for making it as hot for him as possible."

"You would?" said the official, in an extremely doubtful sort of way.

"Most decidedly! That is the only way to handle such a man. Once let him see that you are afraid of him and your game is up. But, on the contrary, make a bold fight—run him out of the country and then there will be no more trouble."

"If I could only think so," was the Governor's dubious reflection.

"Well, that's the way it looks to me, but of course we all see with different eyes."

"But I say, Brockford, is this Cinnabar mine really worth going into?" the other asked, abruptly. "Talbot told me, you know, when he was anxious to get his pardon, that the mine was played out, and I have no reason to believe that he was not speaking the truth at the time; that is, the truth as it appeared to him."

"A dodge on his part to get you out of the idea of investing in the property," Brockford answered. "He knows that the mine is a good one, and of course if he succeeded in getting his pardon, he would be able to get hold of the property himself, for, even if he hadn't the money required to put it in order, he could find plenty of speculators willing and even anxious to invest."

"By Jove! I never thought of that!"

"Well, Governor, you can bet high that was his idea."

"Perhaps so; but I tell you what it is, Brockford, I don't relish the position that I find myself in: it is not pleasant. I'm no street fighter, and I don't desire to be embroiled in a difficulty."

with this desperado. Now, can't you think of some means by which I can get out of this disagreeable hole? You know the ways such things are managed up in this country, but I don't. Now, supposing you were in my situation—supposing this outlaw had threatened your life just as he has threatened mine—

"I should arm myself to the teeth and shoot him on sight at the very first convenient opportunity," replied Brockford, grimly.

"Ah, yes, but you forget!" cried the Governor, quickly; "this Dick Talbot, with a price of a thousand dollars set upon his head, isn't going to walk about this town in his own proper person so that any one will know and recognize him; and, for the matter of that, what is this Talbot like when he is himself? Do you know?"

Brockford shook his head.

"Does any one in the town know him? Would he be recognized if he appeared right in the town without taking the trouble to disguise himself at all?"

"I don't think he would, for, since the time when he flourished here, a new set of men have come in. No, the chances are ten to one that he wouldn't be recognized."

"Then see what fearful odds I am laboring under!" the official continued, nervously. "I am liable to meet this man any day in the street, without knowing or suspecting him. He will have a chance at any time to murder me in cold blood without giving me an opportunity to raise a finger in self-defense. Come! can't you suggest something? You see that your idea of making an open fight with him won't work at all."

Brockford remained silent for a few minutes, evidently deep in reflection, but at last he spoke:

"Well, there is one other way that, in such a case, I might adopt."

"Go ahead! I rely entirely on you in this matter!"

"It's fighting fire with fire."

"No matter what it is, so long as it succeeds!"

"Well, if I were situated as you are, I should employ a body of desperate men—fellows as wild and lawless as this Talbot is himself—to hunt him down."

"A capital idea!" cried the Governor, slapping his knee in exultation; "a splendid idea! the very thing!"

"It will be expensive, though."

"I don't care a continental what it costs!" the official replied. "What are a few hundreds of dollars when a man's life is at stake?"

"Nothing! that's a fact!"

"But where will I find these desperate gentlemen?" the Governor questioned. "Can't you arrange that portion of the business for me? You understand the ins and outs of this wild region far better than I do."

"Perhaps you won't like the men I would select."

"What do I care who or what they are? So long as they do the work, what matters the tools?"

"Very true. This, then, is my idea: Talbot wanted to buy his pardon by bringing the outlaws known as the Black-hoods to justice; just reverse the thing now. Give the Black-hoods a chance to buy their pardons by either killing or capturing Dick Talbot."

"He must be killed!" declared the Governor, decidedly. "It is of no use to capture him. We had him safe enough, the last time, and see how he slipped through our fingers! No, no; I want him dead, not alive."

"I can easily arrange that, and in addition to the pardons you will probably have to pay some money."

"All right; curse the expense!"

"I think I can put myself in communication with the Black-hoods to-night. There is a certain road where solitary travelers are generally stopped by these gentlemen, and if I go that way I shall be pretty sure to encounter them."

"Make any arrangement you like and I will back it!" the official exclaimed, in glee.

And so the trap was laid to ensnare Captain Dick Talbot.

CHAPTER X.

THE BLACK-HOODS.

WITH the falling of the shades of night over the town of Cinnabar, on the evening of the same day that the interview between the Governor and Brockford had taken place, a horseman rode forth from the town and took the trail leading up the river toward the McCloud canyon.

The horseman was a tall, muscular man, well armed and well mounted, with long hair and a flowing beard.

About two miles from the town the road bent abruptly to the right, forced from the river by the huge rocks which, towering toward the sky, formed the long, dark McCloud canyon.

A mile from the turn the horseman followed the trail, the gloom gathering so thick about him that he could hardly see his horse's ears, but the beast went on as though used to the way, and at a certain spot turned aside from the main road to the left, following a little

"blind" trail leading directly into the wilderness that intervened between the road and the river.

The rider bent himself almost double in the saddle, shielding himself behind his horse's head from the waving pine boughs that threatened to sweep him from his seat.

A short quarter of a mile from the junction of the blind trail with the main road, there was a little clearing, and in its center a rude log cabin had been erected; only a small affair, and apparently deserted, for the roof was sadly dilapidated, and the door had been battered so that it swung by a single hinge, threatening at any moment to tumble to the ground.

A strange location for a cabin, for in this mining region the miners and Indians were the only inhabitants, and the whites always pitched their habitations by the side of running water, and the red-skins, generally, in the little pleasant open valleys amid the great mountain chains.

But two explanations were possible in regard to the old cabin: either it was the abode of some old solitary, disgusted with the world, and seeking to hide himself and his troubles from his fellow-men that he despised, or else had been built for some evil purpose.

In the open glade the horseman dismounted, and the moment he was out of the saddle and cast the reins on the neck of the beast, the horse turned away of its own accord and marched into a dense thicket at the north end of the glade, plainly showing that the animal was no stranger to the spot. Then the man entered the house, first listening cautiously to make sure that he was not followed.

Small need of this precaution, though, for the gloom was so dense that if any one had played the spy upon the man, and, following close upon his heels, lurked now a dozen yards off, the keenest pair of eyes would not have been able to detect whither he had gone.

At one end of the house a rude chimney stood, built of logs like the rest of the hut and plastered with mud; the chimney-place was some four feet square.

Groping through the darkness the horseman proceeded to the chimney-place; it was plain that he was perfectly familiar with the premises. Stooping, he laid hold of an iron ring which was carefully concealed in a cunningly contrived nook in the back of the fireplace, gave it a pull, and the whole back swung open, moving on hinges so well oiled that the heavy door—for such in truth it was—never made the slightest sound in opening.

If the darkness of Egypt had not reigned supreme within the old cabin, a staircase, rudely constructed, might have been discerned to which the door gave access.

It was a very cleverly-devised affair. The huge chimney, built twice as big as was necessary, easily afforded room for the stairway, and no one not in the secret would have ever suspected the existence of the underground passage, for the stairway led right down into the earth.

The horseman descended without a moment's hesitation, carefully closing the concealed door after him, thus completely cutting off all access to the outer world.

Ten feet down into the earth the man descended, and then found himself in a narrow passageway barred by a heavy door.

The horseman ran his hand over the surface of the barricade until he touched a concealed spring, which, yielding under his pressure, operated the machinery of the door, and it at once opened to afford him entrance.

He passed through the portal and entered into the cellar-like apartment beyond.

He was in the secret haunt of the Black-hoods, the most daring band of road-agents who had ever defied the law in northern California.

The underground retreat so carefully planned and the entrance to which was so skillfully contrived, was an apartment about twenty feet wide by twenty long.

A regular cellar had been dug in the earth, about ten feet deep, beams and flooring for a roof placed some two feet below the surface of the ground, the soil then carefully replaced over the roof, with shrubs and pines planted in it, so as to conceal all traces of the excavation.

A rude table stood in the center of the room, containing now the remains of a repast, which, although served without ceremony, miner fashion, was not to be despised by a hungry man, and it had been flanked by bottles of the strong liquors dear to the heart of the average mortal.

Around the room five rude bunks were arranged, and in one corner there was a miscellaneous collection of articles, the "plunder" that the road-agents had acquired, saddles, whips, spurs, weapons, etc., "too numerous to mention," as the auction bills have it.

The "Black-hoods" were all at home when the horseman entered—four men, and he, the chief of the band, made the fifth.

Five men only were there in the band, but the Black-hoods had made it as lively for Northern California as though they boasted a dozen.

The road-agents did not differ in their dress and manners from the average mountain miner, excepting, perhaps, that they were

rather better armed, each and every man boasting a whole arsenal of weapons.

In personal appearance the men differed vastly. Man No. 1., or Letter B., as he was termed in the "argot" of the gang, was a tall, lanky fellow, with a sharp face, yellow hair and beard, the very picture of the sharp, plodding Yankee schoolmaster of the olden time. No. 2, Letter C, was nearly as tall as the other, but was heavily-built, broad-shouldered and ox-like in appearance; his face and figure betrayed the Dutchman, and when he opened his mouth his speech confirmed it. No. 3, Letter D, was a most decided contrast to the other two, being a little dried-up sort of man, hardly half the size of either of the others. He was swarthy in color, quick and nervous in action, eyes like two jet beads, and a careful observer, well posted as to matters and things on the Pacific slope would have quickly declared that he had far more right to roam amid the golden valleys than any of the rest, for he was native to the soil, a Californian born, a descendant of the old Spanish Mexican cattle-kings, who, in the days of yore, lorded it over thousands of acres with all the princely pride of blue blood and noble estate. The fourth man, Letter E, was one of the most remarkable of the band in personal appearance. He was about the medium height, as fat as a hog and as clumsy, too, but as strong as a horse. A single look at his great jaws and beefy sides and one would at once set him down as a man who had handled at some time the butcher's cleaver; a most perfect embodiment was he of sheer brute force.

The captain of the gang—Captain A, as his men dubbed him—was a tall, muscular man with a heavy brown beard and long curling brown hair; a dashy sort of fellow in appearance; a good deal such a man as the daring leader of a desperate band of outlaws would be popularly supposed to be.

The road-agents were lounging around the room in various positions when their chief entered, and they merely contented themselves with nodding to him as he helped himself to a rudely-constructed skin chair and took a pull at one of the bottles of liquor upon the table.

"It's a chilly night, boys," he observed. "It seems to me as if spring was never going to come."

The band, as one man, nodded assent.

The apartment was illuminated by a couple of candles placed upon the table, so that the band could see each other, for in this underground abode the blessed light of the sun never came.

"Well, boys, I've got some good news for you," the captain continued.

The outlaws pricked up their ears at this. "Of course you have all heard of this Dick Talbot affair—how he offered, if the Governor gave him a free pardon for all he had done in the past, to hunt us down and give us up to justice."

"Make us stretch hemp!" exclaimed the tall, Yankee-like road-agent, with a sarcastic grin.

"Exactly."

"A fine promise, but first get the salt on the tail of your bird before you boast of catching it," suggested the Californian.

"Oh, he reckoned that he could fix that all right," the captain replied. "Dick Talbot will never be hung for want of assurance. Well, now that he and the Governor have had trouble of course there is pretty bad blood between them. He has openly proclaimed war to the knife and has threatened the life of his foe, and so it happens that the tables are turned, exactly. He was going to buy his pardon by hunting us down, and now I've had the offer of a pardon for all of us provided that we hunt him down. What do you say to that, boys? We've made money enough to retire, and if we accept this offer we can do so with perfect safety—no danger of being called to account for our little fun with the coaches. A full pardon for each and every one of us, if we put Dick Talbot out of the way. We must measure him for a coffin and put him in it, and that won't be a very tough job for us, will it be, boys?"

CHAPTER XI.

A CONSULTATION.

"OH, no!" the road-agents cried, in a sort of a chorus, and in truth they thought that, to use the mountain parlance, they had a "soft thing of it."

Of Dick Talbot they knew very little. Of course all of them had heard of him, for he was a sort of a local hero and the early times of the city of Cinnabar were rarely discussed without the name of Injun Dick being mentioned.

And then, too, his attack on the train amply proved that he was a man of metal, but these outlaws never would have been willing to acknowledge, even for a single instant, that Talbot was any match for them, and therefore they looked upon the capture of Injun Dick as an extremely simple matter.

"You agree with me, then, boys; we must 'go' for this gay sport?" the road-agent leader inquired.

"Oh, yes!" Letter B responded, and the rest chimed in, assenting.

"But, captain, where shall we find him?" the Californian asked, wily, like all his race.

"In Cinnabar City, if I ain't wrong in my reckoning," the outlaw leader replied. "The Governor, with Brockford, the postmaster, is going to tackle the old Cinnabar mine, and as Talbot has an idea that he's got about as good a claim to that piece of property as any man on this hyer footstool, the chances are just ten to one that he'll come to town, in disguise, of course, and proceed to make it hot for the men intruding upon his rights."

"Waal, I calculate that you've got it about right, thar," the Yankee decided; the Californian concluded that such was his opinion also, while the other two nodded silently, as they generally did. The Yankee and the Californian, after the captain, were the brains of the gang, the Dutchman and the butcher being simply big brutes, fit only to carry out the plans of the others.

"But I say, cap'n!" exclaimed the Yankee, suddenly, "is it a sure thing about this hyer pardon? no gum game about it?"

"Oh, no, no doubt about it at all. The pardons are all made out, five of them, all in blank, ready for the insertion of our names the moment the job is done. The Governor is mortally afraid of Talbot, for Talbot has sworn to get even with him for the little trick which his excellency played upon him. The Governor thinks that Talbot means to kill him at the very first convenient opportunity, and the chances are, as it appears to me, that that idea is pretty near correct. The Governor is not a fighting man, and he isn't anxious to measure his skill in that line with Iojun Dick; and so, while he was fretting over the idea, a certain party suggested that he could make a bargain with us to attend to the matter for him, and he jumped at the chance."

"He wants us to catch him so that he'll have a chance to present him with a hempen necktie, eh?" observed the Yankee.

"Oh, no!" cried the captain, quickly, "that isn't the idea at all! Talbot slipped through his fingers so easily when he entrapped him so skillfully that he hasn't the slightest idea of trying that game over again. He wants Dick Talbot dead, not living."

All the outlaws nodded approvingly; it suited their ideas to a dot. Dead men tell no tales—and dead men are harmless, either for good or evil.

"So you see that is the way the land lies, boys," the captain continued. "Talbot must be killed; we must finish him, and in this easy manner earn our pardons for all that we have done in the past."

"You think Talbot will come to the town?" the Yankee said.

"Yes, I think he will. He was in search of the Governor the other day when he stopped the train—and an extremely neat bit of work it was, too; I don't think that we could have done it any better ourselves. Well, he didn't get the man he was after, and when he learns that he is tarrying in Cinnabar the chances are big that he will come after him."

"That's so!" the Yankee averred.

"And we must smell him out. He may come in disguise; we must be on the look-out and spot him, but I have an idea that, as it is quite a long time since he was in the town and there isn't hardly anybody in Cinnabar now who would be apt to recognize him, he'll be apt to make his appearance in his own proper person."

"Yes, but as there isn't any one of us that ever knew him it will be just the same as if he was disguised," the Californian concluded.

The captain laughed.

"I've got a point in regard to that!" he exclaimed. "I've found a fellow in Cinnabar that knows Talbot like a book; he's a drunken vagabond and is quite willing to tell all that he knows, provided that he is paid for the information. Just by accident I happened to run across him and discovered that, in the old time, he was a resident of the camp when Talbot flourished here in all his glory."

"Waal now, cap'n, that's what I call a streak of luck!"

"Luck? It is miraculous!" the little Californian cried, and Dutchman and the butcher nodded, as usual.

"The fellow's name is Bowers—Joe Bowers, and when I found out that he was the very man I wanted, I cultivated his acquaintance. It cost me five dollars to get him drunk, though, for I never met a man who could swallow whisky so easily, and at first it seemed to have no more effect upon him than so much water, but I fixed him, at last, and he has agreed to show me Talbot if he comes into the town."

"But, can you trust him?" inquired the ever cautious and mistrustful Yankee.

"Oh, yes, I think so, as long as I pay him; and, by the way, boys, this little agreement has been made through Brockford, the postmaster; he has authority to act for the Governor, and of course it is necessary that he should be able to distinguish us when he meets us in the town, so I just told him that we would all wear a little piece of black court-plaster on our faces. It don't matter how little the patch is, or where we put it. Of course such a slight mark as that

won't be apt to excite any attention, but it will enable him to pick us out in a moment. And now, boys, there's another little bit of business that we've got to attend to in the town. You all know Nic of the Bella Union?"

They all nodded assent.

"Well, she's got to be run out of the town."

"How's that?" asked Letter B, in wonder.

"There's a certain party wants her out of the way; it's a hundred-dollar job, and I thought that we might as well take the cash as any one else."

"Oh, yes, certainly; but what's the programme in regard to her? are we to make a 'stiff' of her?" the Yankee demanded.

The outlaw leader shook his head.

"No, that isn't necessary; all that is required is to drive her out of the town. We must go to the Bella Union and kick up a row the moment she comes out on the stage, make such a disturbance that she won't be able to sing, and if she braves it out, for she's a plucky little imp, why some of us must pretend to be drunk and insist upon making her acquaintance; we must waylay her after the performance is over, force our way to her room, and in fact worry her until she is glad to get out of the town."

Then at this up spoke the butcher, suddenly, and much to the astonishment of his comrades, for he seldom took the lead in anything.

"I know how to fix it," he said; "leave it all to me. I've had a hankering arter the gal for some time, but I thought that I had better not fool with her for fear I might get the gang in trouble; but, since it has come up in the way of business, I had just as lief take the job off the hands of the rest of you as not."

The outlaws laughed; the burly butcher was the last man in the world that any one would have taken to be a victim of the tender passion.

"I for one freely resign my share in the matter," the captain replied.

"And I for another!" cried the Yankee. "I ain't anxious to have anything to do with that little spitfire, and you had better look out, old man, how you attempt to tackle her, for she carries a popgun, and they do say she ject as lief let drive at a man as not."

"By all the saints!" exclaimed the Californian, "I want nothing of such a girl!"

"Dat ish me, you bet!" chimed in the Dutchman, roused from his abstraction by the momentous question.

"I'll tend to her, all right," the butcher promised, with a self-satisfied leer.

Everything is understood then; and remember, boys, you are to take orders from Brockford just the same as you would from myself. I sha'n't probably see you for two or three days, or, maybe, a week, as I've got a little business to attend to up Yreka way."

"All right, captain, you can depend upon us!" Letter B exclaimed, and the rest assented.

"And until those two matters are settled, we had better shut this place up and hang out round the town somewheres. Don't all go together, though, for that might excite suspicion."

"Oh, we'll attend to that."

"Well, that's all I've got to say; after we've settled Talbot—and, mind you, he's got to be killed, not taken alive—we'll have a division of the spoils that we hav'n't divided up yet, and dissolve partnership; I reckon that it's about time, too, for I don't think we could keep on much longer. We'd be pretty apt to be hunted out of our holes; so-long, boys; I'm off!"

And, with the salutation, the road-agent leader withdrew, mounted the stairs again, proceeded through the old hut to the wood where his horse had found shelter, and with a free rein galloped back toward Cinnabar City.

The plot was working, and there was a prospect of lively times soon.

CHAPTER XII.

AN ASTOUNDING PROPOSITION.

ABOUT the same time that the Black-hoods in their mountain retreat were discussing their projects—or, to be more exact, perhaps it was an hour or so after that time—Brockford, whose name had been mentioned so prominently in their deliberations, sat in his express-office, making up his books. The mail and express coach, which was due from the north at nine, had arrived half an hour late, and so Brockford had been detained in the office a little later than usual.

Just as he finished his entries and closed the book, the door of the office opened and a tall, slender, elderly man entered. He was dressed very plainly, in complete black, but with scrupulous neatness, and bore himself with a careless, jaunty air that plainly bespoke the well-bred, cultured man of society. He had a long, thin face, strangely pale in hue; his eyes were gray, small and keen; his hair, once black, but now thickly streaked with gray, was brushed carefully back behind his ears, and as his face was smoothly shaven, he had quite a ministerial look.

This was Mr. Joscelyn Daily, the father of the beautiful Cassandra, a man of "winning ways," apparently without guile; a gentleman in search of a good mining speculation, but, although he

had tarried in Cinnabar City for nearly a month now, and good mines were running about the street—figuratively speaking—begging for a buyer, yet he had not succeeded in suiting himself.

Some Cinnabar "sharps," who were popularly reputed to know a thing or two, had rather taken pity upon this lonely, unprotected stranger who had journeyed so far with "ducats" to invest, and, although it made their hearts bleed to "rope in" such an innocent sort of a mild old duck, so "childlike and bland" in his way, yet business was business, and so they had taken it upon themselves to show the man from "beyond the gates" a thing or two in the way of card-playing, both for amusement and profit.

But for once in their lives the sharps of the mining town went for wool and returned shorn. Amusement undoubtedly they had, but the profit went to the share of the mild, pale-faced Mr. Daily, who, in the beginning, explained that he knew very little about cards, although he had always had, in his home circle, the reputation of being the luckiest man that ever shuffled a pack of the painted pasteboards.

And these bold sharps—these wild and dashing blades of Cinnabar, the go-ahead men of the town—for on the great Pacific slope the gamblers are not the outcast pariahs that they are in the East, but, on the contrary, generally number among their tribe some of the best men of the community—they chuckled in their sleeves and winked at each other as the simple Mr. Daily, in his honest way, boasted of his luck, and related how, despite the skill of his antagonists, sheer dumb luck nearly always enabled him to come out ahead.

It seemed really a shame to "skin" so innocent—so great a flat, but, as we observed, "business was business," and it would be really a charity, too, so these shrewd men of Cinnabar thought, to take a little of the conceit out of the old gentleman, and perhaps save him from going further and faring worse; so they "went" for him.

In the card-room of the Occidental a nice little party sat down one evening, determined, each and every one of them, to teach Mr. Daily that he was not so lucky at cards as he believed himself to be, and that there was a thing or two about the exhilarating game of poker that he had yet to learn.

They went for him lightly at first. It was against the rules of these bold blades to "skin" a man completely at the jump.

They ran the first "pot" up to about a hundred dollars, and then in mercy they "saw" and "called" Mr. Daily. The man who had "staid" in had a pair of tens, which was "good," but the old gentleman had three jacks, which was "better," and so he raked the pile, much to the astonishment of the table, for no one had believed, from the way in which he had backed his hand, that it had amounted to anything, and they all began to believe that the stranger was right when he had declared that he was a bad player, but a fool for luck.

The Cinnabar sharps felt disgusted with the first attempt, and at once concluded that there was no use of wasting time over the matter, but they might as well go in and lay the stranger out at once, and so they rung in a "cold deal" on him, but Mr. Daily had the "cut," and in some way he happened to cut so as to slightly disarrange the "combination." According to the programme Daily ought to have had four kings and one of his opponents four aces, just enough to beat him; but the kings being so strong, and the chances so great that the queens would not be out, that even a first-class player, unless suspicious of a swindle, would be apt to bet almost his life upon the kings' winning.

But, as we observed, the "combination," in some mysterious way, was upset by Daily's "cut," for the man who should have got the four queens only got three; one of the queens was missing. Of course he took the chances that one of Daily's kings had gone astray also, and so he "staid in"; the rest all went out, with the exception of Daily, but from his nervous manner it was plain to his opponent that his hand was not a strong one—not four kings, sure, or he would have backed them more liberally.

The pot was about one hundred dollars, and it was the stranger's turn to "chip" in.

"I'll go a hundred!" he said, promptly, and with quite a boastful air, as he planked the money.

This was so evidently a bluff on a weak hand that the Cinnabar chap could not help smiling, and he instantly "saw" the hundred, and went a hundred better; he felt satisfied that he was going to "skin" Mr. Daily, this time; but, judge of his astonishment, when Daily promptly met the hundred and went five thousand dollars better.

This floored the Cinnabar sharp. "A fool for luck," indeed! Daily had got his four kings and was betting on an invincible hand.

Cinnabar did not dare to put up five thousand and "call" Daily; he was not inclined to pay that amount for the privilege of seeing the four kings, and so Mr. Daily raked the pile.

But the curiosity of the beaten man was too great to be restrained, and as Daily pulled the

money over to his side of the table, in his calm and gentle way, he cried:

"Stranger, I'll give you ten dollars to let me see what you had in your hand."

The old gentleman accepted the offer at once, and displayed a *pair of kings*!

The Cinnabar men grinned a ghastly smile, and an idea went round the board, just then, that this cool and quiet Mr. Daily, for all his innocent ways, could handle the pasteboards for all that they were worth.

And so it came to pass from that night out, when the bold sharps of Cinnabar went "gunning" for flats, they gave Mr. Daily a wide berth.

"How-y'-do, Mr. Brockford," the gentleman said, as he entered the office. "Have you a small box by express for me, from Frisco?"

"Nothing to-night."

"Strangel! it ought have arrived."

"I'll bring it up when it comes."

"Thank you."

"And, by the way, Mr. Daily, I wanted to see you about a little matter," Brockford added, abruptly. "I have been intending to speak to you in regard to it for some time. You have a very lovely daughter, Mr. Daily, and she has made such an impression upon me that I wanted to ask you to use your influence with her on my behalf."

"Oh, certainly," the old gentleman replied in the most benignant and gracious manner. "I shall be glad to oblige you, although I fear it will be useless. My girl, I am afraid, will never marry."

"Yes, but surely your *command* would have weight with her."

"My command! yes, I presume so; but, Mr. Brockford, much as I esteem you, I should hesitate to use such a measure."

"Well, Mr. Daily, the only thing with me is, that, interested as I am in your daughter, I should like to have a sort of a right to protect you in case of any trouble arising."

"Trouble! bless me! trouble concerning me?" the old man exclaimed, in amazement.

"Yes. They say, you know, that you're the worst black-leg in the town, and if Judge Lynch should ever get started hyer, you're about the first man that would suffer."

The old man winced, despite his wonderful nerves, for there was something brutal about the speech, more in the delivery, though, than in the matter, bad as that was.

"Oh, I don't think any one will trouble me," he observed.

"Well, I don't know; public sentiment is getting aroused; there is too much card-playing in the town; there are too many men like you who are making a living out of it. You'll all get cleaned out some day." Brockford's speech was extremely coarse and offensive.

"Oh, I guess not; but, as you have been kind enough to make me a proposition, I don't mind making you one. As you just observed, I play cards once in a while, and I'm willing to risk my girl as I risk my money. You put up a thousand dollars and then I'll put Cassy against it, counting her another thousand, and we'll play poker for the two. If you win the two thousand, you shall have my daughter, and then you're to pay the thousand over to me; if you lose, why, that ends the matter—I have it all."

Brockford looked at the old man earnestly, for a moment, a slight frown upon his face, then he spoke:

"Do you take me for a fool?" he cried. "I might as well go and throw my money into the river. What chance would I stand against you?"

"Not much," replied Daily, quietly; "if you did, I wouldn't make the offer. Well, I am sorry we can't make a trade. Perhaps some other time we can think of a way; good-night," and he politely bowed himself out of the office.

CHAPTER XIII.

A WARNING.

Now then in the course of our story jump we one full day ahead and take up the thread of our tale just as the shades of night are falling thick and heavy over the town of Cinnabar.

Down the main street of the city wandered a broad-shouldered fat man, whose garments were much the worse for wear, but who marched along as proudly as though he in his own right owned the fee-simple of the richest mine in the burg.

But in truth, what are wealth and honors, or all the golden gifts of fortune, compared to a contented mind?

And such a thing Joe Bowers possessed, for it was of that renowned vagabond that we write.

The world owed him a living; he was determined to have it. So far he had succeeded in getting it—a pretty good one, too, and with very little trouble.

Let other men bother with mines—rack their brains over the dry details of business; he would have none of it. The embodiment of laziness, it was his lot to wander placidly through this weary vale of tears, enjoying life as he went, content to seize upon the pleasure of the moment as it passed, and reckless of what the morrow might bring forth.

Bowers's progress down the main street was extremely slow, for he was nearly in the center

of the town; saloons, "hotels" and kindred places of entertainment were thick, and the jolly bummer made it a point of honor not to pass a house where creature comforts might be procured without taking a look at the inside.

He had been in Cinnabar City only a day or two, but already his face and form were well known to the majority of the saloon-keepers—not to their sorrow, as we fancy the keen and careful reader exclaims, for in the halcyon days of which we write "No Trust" was the motto that every saloon-keeper of the thriving metropolis of the Shasta valley emblazoned proudly on his banner.

As Bowers had tearfully remarked, at the close of his first day's and night's experience in Cinnabar:

"The town ain't wot it used to be, for in the golden time of yore not a tumbler-juggler was there in the city who wasn't proud to set 'em up for yours truly, J. Bowers, and chalk it on the slate. Alas! how hev the mighty fallen! It's a bit a drink, ponied up in advance, or no fire-water!"

But luckily for Bowers he had struck the town at a pretty good time, for when he reached Cinnabar the news of the attack of Captain Dick Talbot was in everybody's mouth and hardly anything else was talked of all over the city.

Bowers was one of those fortunate mortals who possessed a host of acquaintances, or, if he didn't, he pretended that he did, which, to a party possessed of the almost unlimited amount of assurance that the bummer enjoyed, was just about the same.

It was hard work for the average man, as he is found in the mining wildernesses of the great golden land, to receive with the cold shoulder the genial cuss, as Artemas Ward puts it, who claims you as an old acquaintance and relates how he met you at such a town, in such a year, and how lively you used to "hoop it up" for the boys, although you may be perfectly well aware that the story is an outrageous lie, and that you never saw the fellow before in all your life, and were never in the place to which he alludes.

And so, despite the hard cash ideas of the dispensers of "fire-water," Bowers "landed upon his feet" when he struck Cinnabar City and found the town wild over the bold exploit of Injun Dick.

He knew the man from A to izzard—had drank with him, chummed with him, been a regular old side-pardner of "his'n"—in fact, if Injun Dick Talbot was the man you were after, he could tell you more about him in a day than all the rest of the world in a year!

And so it happened that the fat bummer got on intimate terms with at least one-half of the town before he had been six hours a resident of the city.

And the crowd generally swallowed his wild and ridiculous yarns, too, for, after Talbot's bold defiance of the Governor of the State, there was hardly any exploit deemed too wild for him to attempt and accomplish, and so Bowers had not suffered.

At last the bummer reached the Occidental Hotel and found there the man he sought, for there was method in his madness, and he had not been on an aimless quest when he had "dropped in" to all the popular resorts of the town.

In the office of the Occidental, glancing at the latest Frisco newspaper, was a well-proportioned man of medium size, dressed plainly in dark clothes and bearing upon his face that unmistakable shrewd look which, to the well-informed observer, at once proclaimed that he was either a speculator following fortune with an eager step, or else a Knight of the Round Table, entitled to sport any card in the pack upon his shield.

Bowers sidled up to him with a broad grin upon his fat face.

"Kin my eyes deceive me?" he exclaimed, in the ridiculous theatrical manner so common to him. "Do I ag'in behold Mr. Cherokee, or am I the victim of a delusion?"

"That is my name, sir," the party accosted responded.

And it was indeed the man so well known to the readers of Injun Dick—the long-bearded sport, who played so prominent a part in that o'er true tale.

But the long beard was gone now, the chin smoothly shaven, only a little imperial and mustache remaining of the once luxuriant beard.

"You remember me, in course, me noble lord?" Bowers exclaimed.

"Yes, I think I have seen you before."

"Uncounted gold you kin bet on that, me royal duke! Are you gwine to stay long in town?"

"Well, I don't know; that depends."

"I understand—upon biz!" cried the bummer, with a knowing wink. "Well, it's hefty, jest now; the river is up, and the stream is strong, 'bank full and rising,' and thar's a Gentile from down below who has jest bin skinning the town, but I've got ducats wot says that you kin skin him and not half try."

"What's his name—perhaps I know him?"

"Daily—Joscelin Daily is his handle, and he's got a regular bluebird of a darter; they do say that 'bout two-thirds of the town is wild arter her."

And at this point the bummer helped himself to a chair and sat down on the opposite side of the table to that which Cherokee occupied.

The loungers in the room who had been watching the progress of the interview now turned their attention elsewhere, satisfied that they had solved the question as to who and what the cool-eyed, good-looking stranger was; he was a gentleman who depended upon fortune for a living, a member of the large class, common the world over, who thought it no harm to aid skill at cards by holding good hands.

"I hev news for you, me noble dook," observed the bummer, in a low tone, so that it was impossible for any one who might chance to be loitering near to overhear him, and yet not betraying by his manner that he was making a communication of importance.

"Yes," responded the other, after the same fashion, still running his eyes over the columns of his newspaper, and not, to all outward seeming, paying any particular attention to the bummer's remarks.

"You bet! Furst and foremost thar's a sharp in town who is mighty anxious to find out what Captain Dick Talbot looks like."

"Perhaps the party may be gratified; who is he?"

"Archy Brockford, postmaster, express-agent, side pardner of the Governor, and the man wot's going into the Cinnabar mine with h.s royal nibs."

"Oh, undoubtedly he will see Talbot in time," Cherokee remarked, the corner of his mouth contracting slightly as he spoke.

"And he's got some little game afoot. Ho got me drunk t'other night." And Bowers winked, expressively.

"You really surprise me! I did not believe that such a thing was possible," the other responded, dryly.

"Oh yes; I acknowledge the corn," the bummer confessed. "Three or four quarts of whisky, provided it's good stuff, with a good grip of its own, will generally fetch my lers, but my head—the head of the ole, original Joe Bowers—why a barrel wouldn't do it!"

"So I supposed."

"Well, the long and the short of it is that I've taken his money, and I'm his man to pint out Dick Talbot if he sets foot in this hyer town, disguised, or in his own proper person."

"So the postmaster is anxious to be counted in," Cherokee observed. "Well, men will be rash, sometimes."

"Right you are, mighty satrap! But, thar's more fun afoot."

"Spit it out!"

"The postmaster wanted to know if I ever went to the Bella Union—that's a little variety dive up-town. I answered that I had dropped in thar onc't, since reaching this hyer burg, and that they kept the worst liquor in town. 'Never you mind that,' he sed; 'you go thar to-night and mebbe you'll see some fun,' and jest then he pointed out a tall, lanky chap a-goin' by."

"He'll be thar to-night," he sed, "and whatever lead he plays you chip in an' foller suit, and it will be money in your pocket." "All right," sed J, "I'm the man to tie to," and I took a good look at the lanky chap so that I would know him ag'in. Nothin' 'markable 'bout him, 'cept that he had a little wad of court-plaster stuck on his chin like he had cut himself in shaving."

"What of it?" asked Cherokee, understanding at once that the bummer attached importance to this fact.

"Oh, nothin', not much to speak of, 'cept that thar's three more chaps in town that nobody don't know nothin' 'bout, 'cept that they've bin seen here onc't or twice, and each one of the other three has got a piece of black court-plaster somewheres on their faces, too."

"I guess we'll take in the Bella Union to-night," the other remarked, laying down his newspaper and rising to his feet.

CHAPTER XIV.

A FIRST-CLASS INSULT TO LA BELLA.

THE performance at the Bella Union generally commenced about eight o'clock.

By that time the miners usually got washed up after the day's toil and strolled into town in search of either news or fun.

A due regard for truth compels us to admit that a goodly number of the miners did not take the trouble to wash up, but came in town without going through that operation, with the mud of the mountain gulches still clinging to their persons; but the usages of Cinnabar City did not require that a man should put on a "billed shirt" and a "plug hat" in order to appear presentable after eventide, and so it didn't matter much. A man who usually took much care of his person and paid any extra attention to such things as cleanliness and neatness was set down by the majority of the miners as being a milk-sop and inclined to put on airs, or frills; but the gamblers of the town, who were usually distinguishable from the rest of the townsmen by the style and neatness of their attire, were alone exempt from this ruling.

The Bella Union was pretty well filled when Cherokee came strolling in, and he contented himself with a seat about half-way down the room by the side of one of the rude tables which were distributed among the benches so that the patrons of the establishment could enjoy the entertainment and their liquor at the same time.

Cherokee had eyes like a hawk, and in glancing around the room, despite the cloud-like tobacco smoke which ascended so freely, he had no difficulty in detecting the four men who wore the little patches of black court-plaster upon their faces. And Cherokee, a keen and practiced observer, used for years to men and manners of the wild mountain region, soon decided upon the characters of the men, so oddly distinguished from the rest of the crowd.

"No honest miners," he muttered, "nor yet gamblers, nor storekeepers; possibly bull-whackers, or mule-skinners," as the drivers of the ox teams and mule caravans are termed, "but more likely desperadoes and cutthroats; but, what is their little game here, to-night?"

Just at this point Bowers sauntered in, beaming grandly on the crowd, as he made his way through the throng. A vacant seat by the table where Cherokee was sitting attracted his eyes, and so, in the most natural way possible, he made his way to it, just as if the selection was pure accident instead of design.

He nodded familiarly to Cherokee as he sat down, called the waiter to him and ordered two "beers," in the most millionaire-like tone, inviting the other to join.

The waiter lingered for the money; cash before delivery was the rule at the Bella Union, as well as in the other saloons of the town.

Bowers, in the most affable manner, asked if the waiter could break a hundred-dollar bill, and that worthy, used to this sort of thing, replied instantly that he could, and then he "saw" the customer and went him "four better" by remarking that they could change a five hundred-dollar bill if the gent had any of them a-lyin' round loose in his pockets. Whereupon the bummer, in the most lordly way, planked down a half-dollar and bade the waiter keep the change, which, as there wasn't any, the official remarked that he reckoned the job was too hefty for him and that he would have to let it out.

And this little episode provoked a general laugh from all the surrounding listeners.

"I don't see Brockford anywheres," Cherokee remarked, over the edge of his glass as he sipped the beer.

"He is out by the door, keeping shady," Bowers replied, under cover of his huge hand wiping his mouth.

"I can't understand what their game is here, to-night," the sport confessed, as the music struck up; the orchestra consisted of two men, and a violin and a base viol the instruments.

"Neither kin I, but the postmaster is at the back of it, and whoever he is backin' jest now, I reckon is worth the lookin' into, my noble look!"

"No harm will be done, anyway, to be wide awake."

The opening music over, up went the little shabby curtain, and the performance began.

The first to appear was a banjo-player, a vile performer upon that simple, yet harmonious instrument, and a worse singer than he was a player, and as he was in that condition popularly known as half-seas-over, his performance was not at all acceptable to the audience. Although the auditors had not paid anything for their admission, yet they thought they had a right to express their approbation or displeasure as freely as they saw fit, and therefore their "remarks" addressed to the banjo-player, were extremely personal, if not particularly pleasant.

They told him that he was a mush-head and a fraud; they recommended him to go and soak the whisky out of him; while, "Give us a rest!" "Play one tune at a time!" "Stand on your head and try it!" were freely sung at him. But the player kept on, unmindful of the disturbance, for he was used to this sort of thing, although not generally quite so bad as to-night. After the fellow had finished the first verse of his song, Bowers, ever irrepressible, capped the climax by yelling out in his peculiar theatrical voice, which he could manage as well as any of the stage-players, and which sounded distinctly above all the din:

"Gentlemen, he ain't fit to cry clams!"

This was the last straw which broke the camel's back; the performer could stand a good deal, but this was something too much.

Down went his banjo, off came his "nigger" wig, and springing to his feet—he could stand, but that was about all—he cried in wrath:

"I can't play for shucks; mebbe I can't sing for sour cakes; but I kin 'climb' the man w'at says I ain't fit to cry clams!" and he was about to descend amid the audience with the intention of making good his words, when the manager of the saloon, who happened by chance to be behind the scenes, a stalwart, middle-aged bruiser—Josh Blixen by name—with one of the assistants, who attended to the scenery, rushed forward, and seizing the enraged banjoist, by main force carried him off, amid the tumultuous applause of the audience.

The player disposed of, the manager appeared

again and apologized to his patrons, assuring them that such a thing shouldn't happen again, and to restore them to good-humor he announced that their prime favorite, the dashing Nic, would immediately appear.

The audience cheered, for the girl was a great favorite, and the manager bowed himself off, quite contented that he had stayed the threatened storm.

"Blow their blooming heyes!" cried the stalwart Josh, who was a native of Britain's tight little island, "bif I didn't think that they would tear the shanty down, an' it cost a pretty penny and be blowed to it!"

The music struck up and Nic came dancing on the stage, looking as pretty as a picture in her fanciful stage attire.

The audience made the old shanty fairly ring with their applause, but as the girl opened her mouth to sing, they hushed at once into silence, and then came three clear and distinct hisses.

Nic shut her pretty little mouth with a sudden snap in angry amazement. It was the first time that she had ever been hissed in all her life, and the insult made her first turn red and then pale.

Even the musicians stopped in amazement and looked among the audience in wonder at the occurrence.

Then up in the center of the audience sprang a big, burly man with a little patch of black court-plaster stuck on his temple over his right eye.

"Say! who did that?" he cried; "who was it that dared for to hiss my little woman?"

The listeners looked at each other in amazement, for the man was a stranger to all of them, and his claim to the bright, particular star of the Bella Union puzzled them.

And as for the girl, she was astounded, and gazed with staring eyes upon the ugly, brute-like fellow.

In answer to the stranger's demand three men rose to their feet, in different parts of the hall. Each man had his hand on a weapon and each one scowled defiantly at the burly stranger.

And although the fact was not noticed by any one else in the room but Cherokee, yet he saw that each one of the three had his face ornamented by a little piece of black court-plaster.

The man who had first risen was almost within arm's-length of Cherokee, and so he was enabled to keep a close watch upon him.

"I hissed, and wot business is it of yours?" cried man No. 2, a tall, lanky fellow, the court-plaster on his jawbone.

"And so did I, and what trouble will you make?" exclaimed No. 3, a little, lithe, yellow chap, the court-plaster on his cheek.

"Dat is me, hiss ter tuyfel!" said No. 4, evidently a Dutchman, and he had the court-plaster on the side of his nose.

"What is it to me?" yelled the first man, pretending to be excited beyond endurance, "What is it to me? A heap, I reckon! Why, gents, this hyer little gal is my old woman, and I ain't a-going to stand hyer and see her abused!"

CHAPTER XV.

AN INDIGNANT DENIAL.

To say that this statement astounded the audience would be to but mildly state the case. They all sat open-mouthed, and stared at the fat and greasy speaker, at the three other men, and some of them at the angry and surprised girl upon the stage, who was fairly crying with rage, so excited was she at the impudent assertion of the stranger.

And as for Cherokee and Bowers, although convinced that the four men were in collusion, yet, for the life of them, they could not understand the meaning of the scene.

"What are they driving at? What game are they up to?" Cherokee said to Bowers rapidly, as the loud hum of astonishment caused by the man's assertion swept through the room.

"You are too much for me, me lord look," Bowers replied, in the same cautious tone. "I 'pass; I can't chip in, this deal."

Of course if the two had known of the offer that had been made to the road-agents, and were also acquainted with the desire that a certain person had to get the girl out of the town, the reason for this mysterious proceeding would have been quite apparent.

"Yes, sir-ee!" the burly fellow continued; "this hyer is my little woman, and while I stand in shoe-leather, no man on top of this hyer earth shall 'buse her!"

"It is no such thing, gentlemen," cried the girl, indignantly. "I am not his little woman, and I never saw the big brute before!"

"Sit down—sit down—shame! shame!" cried a few voices, and, it is a fact worth recording, that not one of the speakers was anywhere near the bold intruder, distance in this case giving courage.

In a twinkling the man whipped out a pair of big revolvers and coolly pulled the hammers back.

"I ain't saying nothing ag'in' no man!" he exclaimed, "and I don't want any man to tread on my toes. This gal is mine; now that she has got to be a big theater star, mebbe she's shamed of old J. Long Jones, her husband, and that's

me! She dusted out of Frisco, going back on me, her nat'ral protector, but I'm willing to look over it, and no man sha'n't 'buse her while I'm 'round!"

"It's all a horrid lie!" exclaimed Nic, terribly enraged. "I never saw this man in all my life; I am not married and never was!"

"Oh, you deny me, do you?" cried the man, savagely; "you never saw me afore! and to think of your saying sich a thing, arter all the money wot I've spent on you; but that settles it! I was a-willin' to let you go on—take all the rope you liked and hang yourself in the end, but, since you're going to stand out ag'in' me, why, then I'll be ugly, too, and I give you fair warning that you've got to stop this kind of life. I won't have no more of it. You kin clear out, if you please, and go where you like, but you sha'n't make a living in this hyer way in this hyer town any longer. You hear me now, quit and git!"

"Gentlemen, I appeal to you!" cried the singing-girl, advancing to the very edge of the stage with outstretched hands. "Will you suffer me to be driven from the town in this manner? I protest to you that I do not know this man, and that I have no idea who or what he is, or why he sets up this absurd and ridiculous claim."

"Oh, yes, take up her quarrel, any or all of you!" the man growled, fiercely, and he scowled ferociously as he spoke, "but the man that does it had better get his coffin ready, for I'll be apt to put him in it."

"Pardner, you're right, and I'll back you in this hyer thing!" cried the lanky man. "I hissed cos I don't like this saucy little piece, and I don't think as how she ought to be encouraged, but, seeing as how she is your old woman, why, you ought to have her, and I'll back you!"

"Yes, yes, that is but right!" exclaimed the second one of the hisses, the native Californian: "who should come between man and wife? No one! Comrade, I will back you, too!"

"Sapperment! dat is goot! I will fight mit dose poys mineself!" cried the Dutchman.

And these four men thus abruptly and oddly banded together, gradually neared each other, and thus formed a league that few within the saloon thought it wise to encounter. And then, too, if the girl was the wife of the burly fellow, (and it was possible that he spoke the truth when he stated that she was, despite her vehement denial, for women are up to such tricks sometimes), it was only natural that he should claim her, and there was quite a deal of sympathy in the breasts of the listeners for the deceived and deserted husband.

A goodly number of them, too, knew "how it was themselves," and had had cause to mourn over woman's fickleness.

"It is all a lie!" the girl repeated, in angry accents, her spirits thoroughly aroused. "I do not know this man, have never known him, and he utters a wicked falsehood when he declares that I ever ran away from him; and why does he want to drive me away from this town? I can tell, for I am not blind if I am a woman, alone and helpless. I don't like to make my wrongs public, and I do not ask any man to be my champion, but, truth is truth, and it should be spoken at all times. This is a wicked conspiracy to drive me away from Cinnabar. There is a man in this town who has deeply wronged me, and he is afraid that I shall be tempted to take the law into my own hands, and, woman though I am, avenge the injury that has been done me. I have threatened him. I own that! I have told him that, unless he does what is right, I will make him suffer, and this disturbance here to-night is all caused by him. He has hired these ruffians to make the attack upon me, and by so doing drive me from the town. They are all strangers—who knows them?—all leagued together, four men—four strong men—against one weak, poor little woman. And this man, my enemy, is here to-night, skulking in the background, anxious to see his tools do the work that he has so carefully planned."

The girl paused to take breath and the postmaster just about this time wished that he was well out of the saloon. He had selected a spot well in the front of the place, where he thought he would be safe from the girl's observation, but he had not calculated rightly upon the sharpness of her eyes, for, used as she was to the place, she had detected him, in an instant.

Brockford was in a decidedly uncomfortable situation, and if he could have quietly left the room without exciting any attention he most certainly would have done so; but, as he was wedged in by a little knot of gaping miners, and could not have moved without disturbing the whole gang, it was impossible for him to get out.

"She's a gritty little woman," Cherokee observed to Bowers, taking advantage of the girl's pause to make the observation. "If women hadn't always been such 'bad medicine' to me, I think that I would go for this girl, for I like her style."

with an emphasis that was not lost.

"And I'm not afraid to name my man!" Nic continued, after the hum of astonishment caused by her words had in a measure subsided. "Since he wants war he shall have it, and as hot as I can make it. You all know the man, gentlemen, and I'm not afraid to name him openly. There he is," and she pointed straight at the annoyed and angry express-agent. "Archibald Brockford, postmaster, express-agent and knave!"

If the girl had jumped from the stage and, advancing to Brockford, had stricken him in the face, she could not possibly have excited more surprise by the action than she did by her words.

Every eye within the room was turned upon the accused man, and in almost breathless suspense the crowd waited for him to speak.

Although taken entirely by surprise, for in this case "the engineer had been hoist by his own petard," yet Brockford, neither in his face nor manner, betrayed any signs of the terrible anger which raged in his heart; he only manifested a sort of indignant surprise as if annoyed by the accusation, but that was all.

He rose slowly to his feet, and every ear present bent eagerly to catch his words.

"This woman is either drunk or crazy, fellow-citizens," he said, coldly. "I know nothing of her, except that she has called at the express-office after express matter, at the post-office after letters, and so contrived to scrape a sort of acquaintance with me, but, beyond that, I know absolutely nothing whatever about her. I reckon that I have something better to do, gentlemen, than to waste my time running after dance-house girls who are always ready to bestow their affection upon any pilgrim with lust enough to pay for a good big spree. I'm sorry that I've been dragged into this thing, but I'm not going to stand any blackmail business, and this woman has only herself to blame for forcing me to speak right out in public in this way. If she'll take my advice she will go with her husband and get out of this town as soon as possible."

"That's the talk!" cried the big fellow, abruptly. "Come along with me, Betsy Jane, an' I won't say nothin' about your hoodin' it off an' a-leavin' me to pine all alone by myself!"

The girl stood rigid as a statue and simply glared at her foes; her anger was too great for words.

At this point the manager thought he was called upon to put in a word. In fear and trembling he had listened to the altercation, expecting each instant to hear the crack of a pistol-shot, the prelude to a fight which would probably result in serious damage to his worldly goods, for when such rough fellows got on the rampage, to destroy and make havoc was the most natural thing in the world.

"Gents all," he began, "I ax your pardink for hinderin', but the verry best place to settle this affair is somewhere hout of 'ere. I don't want no trouble—no disturbance nor nothink of that kind in this hyer shanty. I run a 'spectable saloon, I does, and all those that wants to kick up a shindy 'ad better get hout. And, Nic, you 'ad better quit and see these gents houtside and settle the blooming thing. I can't 'ave no disturbance in 'ere, you know."

Then up rose Cherokee, cool, calm and ice-like.

"This man is a villainous liar!" he said, pointing to the big fellow. "He is nothing to this girl nor she to him, and I am ready to take up her quarrel on the spot!"

CHAPTER XVI.

NIC'S CHAMPION.

THIS declaration was a surprise indeed, to all within the room. The speaker was a stranger, but the style of his dress afforded a clew to his occupation, and hardly a man in the room but understood that he meant business from the jump.

"I'm not at all acquainted with this lady," Cherokee continued, and he bowed politely to the amazed singing-girl; "but I am convinced from what I have heard that she speaks the truth, and that this man doesn't, and therefore, as I am a very plain-spoken man, and fully believe that honesty is the best policy, I have no hesitation in telling this man here that he is an unmitigated liar and a scoundrel, and these other three fellows, who are backing him up, ain't any better. That's my say-so, pardners; now take it up if you dare."

And the big fellow did take it up, pretty quick, too, but not quick enough to get ahead of the man who, in the old days of Cinnabar, bore the reputation of being the best and quickest snap-shot that ever pulled a trigger.

All the advantages, too, were apparently upon the side of the man who claimed to be the husband of the singing girl. His revolver was in his hand, the hammer up, ready for action, while his antagonist, on the contrary, stood erect, no weapon in sight, and not only weaponless, but with his hands thrust carelessly into the pockets of the loose black sack coat which he wore.

He really looked like murder for the big stranger, but the advantage of the apparently weaponless

less condition of the bold speaker, and shoot him down in cold blood.

But, Cherokee was no fool to rush into heedless danger, and he was fully prepared to practice the old trick that had so often served Dick Talbot's purpose.

In each coat-pocket he carried a ready-cocked "Derringer," carrying an ounce ball, about as effective a weapon as the mind of man ever invented. The pea-like ball of the average six or seven shooter, might fail to stop the savage rush of an enraged man eager for blood and death, but few mortals are ox-like enough in their natures to stand up after being bored by the ounce Derringer ball.

The big fellow "pulled" quick, throwing his hand well up into line, and as he was not ten feet from Cherokee, the latter's danger seemed terrible, but, quicker than the stranger was the card-sharp. He discharged the pistol through the lining of the pocket, the heavy ball striking the revolver of the other right before the trigger-guard, and sent it spinning into the air at the very instant that the man pulled the trigger, so that the revolver-ball went into the ceiling, but the shooter, every nerve in his huge frame tingling from the sudden shock, just as if he had incautiously undertaken to try conclusions with an electric battery at full force, began to dance up and down in the most ridiculous way.

"Ow, ow!" he howled, "the cuss has plugged me! Ow, ow! holy Moses! my arm is gone!"

The thing was so laughable that all within the room roared with laughter, the three other strangers excepted.

They were on their flight and at once pulled out their revolvers, but Cherokee was not the kind of man to be caught napping. Gentlemen who followed his peculiar line of business usually went well "heeled," and so, in addition to the handy Derringers, he had a pair of revolvers belted to his waist underneath his coat; no toy weapons, fit playthings for the city sport, but a pair of heavy "navys"—tools that a man might trust his life to with perfect confidence in the wildest and most dangerous regions of the Far West.

And Cherokee had his weapons out and ready before any of the other three.

Excitement now was on tip-toe, and few hands were there in that room that did not finger a weapon just then, for a free fight seemed certain.

But Cherokee had the advantage, and his opponents were wise enough to see it; no blind fools were they to rush heedlessly to certain death.

They hesitated, although their weapons were in their hands, yet they did not attempt to either cock or raise them.

The card sharp was master of the situation, for his weapon was out and ready.

"The first man that attempts to raise his tool, or to draw back the hammer, I shall be obliged to bore!" he cried. "I ain't a hog, and four to one is a pretty too much odds for me, but I'm willing to take you all, one by one, and give you satisfaction, if that will be agreeable."

"No double-banking!" exclaimed an old and stalwart miner, an authority among the "boys." "Four to one ain't the clean white article. Fair play is a jewel, and that is what we mean to have, eh, boys?"

The "boys" at once immediately signified that they agreed with the speaker.

"That's the ticket, gentlemen!" ejaculated Bowers, who never could keep quiet. "That is what makes me proud of this hyer town of Cinnabar! No double-banking—no piling onto a stranger—a pilgrim from afar, but a fair shake and a square deal all around. Oh, gents, it does me proud for to see you run the game this hyer way."

By this time the burly stranger had examined himself and discovered that he had not sustained any material damage, and great was the rage that swelled within his breast when he found that he was totally unhurt. He felt that he had made a fool of himself, and so panted for a chance to get even with the man who had so cleverly beaten him at his own game.

"There won't be any double-banker as for as I am concerned!" he exclaimed. "All I ax is a fair show for my money. This hyer gent has poked his nose into my business and taken up a quarrel that don't interest him a bit, and now all I want is satisfaction."

"And that is exactly what I stand ready to give you," Cherokee replied, decidedly.

"Sartain, of course! I'll go bail that this gent won't be no slouch when it comes to backin' his words!" Bowers remarked, with a great deal of dignity.

"And I ain't hankerin' arter his life, either," the burly fellow observed, "but I reckon that I kin spile that dandy face of yours if you dare to stand up ag'in' me for ten minutes."

This didn't strike the listeners as a particularly fair proposition, considering that the speaker was nearly twice the size of the man whom he proposed to batter, but the offer suited Cherokee exactly. In the old days it was said that no man as cunning with the hands as he had ever set foot in the Shasta valley, and he felt per-

the big stranger, despite his great size, all he wanted in a fair hand-to-hand encounter.

"Well, I'm agreeable to that offer," he replied, "and if you are able to spoil the looks of my face, all I've got to say is that you are a better man than I take you to be."

"I'll go four dollars and a half to a slap on the back that my esteemed friend hyer whales you, gentle fat stranger, like blue blazes!" Mr. Bowers exclaimed.

"Come on, out into the street, and have it out like a man!" the big man cried. "And arter I've settled this chap, I'll come back and have it out with you," he continued, turning toward the stage and shaking his fist at the singing-girl, who, with anxious eyes, had watched the progress of the quarrel.

Then the inmates of the saloon all started toward the street, and Brockford, at the door, took advantage of the confusion to speak to Bowers as he came out following close on Cherokee's heels.

"I say, Bowers, who is this fellow, do you know him?" the postmaster asked, linking arms with Bowers and marching down the street with him.

"Like a book, me royal dook!" the bummer answered, confidently.

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"Oh, I've knowed him a heap of years."

"This fellow will kill him!"

"Not much, you bet!"

"Why, he is twice his size."

"The battle is not always to the strong, and Cherokee will knock the stuffing out of him inside of ten minutes!" Bowers cried, confidently.

"Cherokee!" cried the other, astonished at so strange an appellation.

"Yes, that's his handle."

"Say! it isn't Dick Talbot in disguise, is it?" asked the postmaster, suddenly, the idea just occurring to him.

"He Dick Talbot!" cried Bowers, in contempt.

"Why, what put that idea in your head?"

"Oh, I don't know; the thought just occurred to me, that's all. Talbot is just about such a man."

"Why he'd make two of this man."

"But who is this one?"

"Cherokee, that's his cognomen, and that's 'bout all that I know of him except that he's one of the smartest sharps that you ever saw, and as for a fighter, he's jest chain-lightning. I tell you! he'll hammer this big cuss awfully; court-plaster and ointment will beat a premium arter this fight is over."

Brockford shook his head doubtfully.

"If the big fellow ever gets one good square blow at him he will beapt to sett e him."

"Pardner, he will never get that lick. Cherokee's legs have been too well brought up to see his body abused. You jest wait—you'll see; if Cherokee don't flax him awful then you kin have my head for a football; kin I say any more?"

Brockford was silent, but not convinced, and by this time the crowd had reached an open place suitable for the conflict.

CHAPTER XVII.

A PASSAGE AT ARMS.

THE crowd marched along in the most decorous manner, and no one not acquainted with their errand would ever have imagined that they were bound to witness a show of human endurance like unto the gladiatorial contests of the days of ancient Rome.

There was no noise, no loud talk, no unseemly display of the angry passions, but all was as quiet as though the crowd had just come from a prayer-meeting.

The burly butcher marched along at the head of the party, with upright head and a confident visage. He felt morally certain of giving the obtrusive stranger a good thrashing for his pains, although he was somewhat annoyed at his interference, for it materially disconcerted his plans. But he reflected that, after he had polished off the stranger, he could take up the pursuit of the girl again, and so he was consoled. Besides, when he thought the matter over carefully, he saw that, after he had given this cool stranger a lesson, it would have a tendency to keep anybody else from interfering on the girl's behalf, and so after all perhaps it was a good thing that the unknown had interfered.

The other three men who were so oddly marked by the little bits of black court-plaster, stuck on the face, had taken advantage of the movement of the crowd to come together in order to hold a consultation.

"What make you of this?" asked the Mexican.

"You are too much for me, John," replied the lanky man.

"He vill kill dot mans," suggested the Dutchman.

"Not by a jugful," responded the Yankee, shrewdly. "It strikes me that our pard has waked up the wrong passenger. This cool sport knows what he is about, and the odds are jest about ten to one that our friend and broth'r is going to get hammered out of time and tune."

"And what shall we do?" questioned the Californian.

"Wait and see how things go, and mind our

eyes pretty sharp, too, or else the crowd may get an idea that we're in cahoots, and then it won't be healthy for us in these diggings."

"Dot is so," the Dutchman admitted. "This is his own private fight, and I don't really see that we have any call to take a hand in the affair at all. Of course if his life was in danger, then by our oath of brotherhood we should be obliged to sail in and pull him through; but, as it is, when he gets enough, all he has to do is to say so, and that ends the matter. Between you and me and the bed-post, he really needs to have some of the conceit taken out of him, for he has an idea that there ain't a man in California who kin boss him at fisticuffs, ees he's been a butcher, you know, and used to such things. He's strong enough, but when it comes to science I really reckon that he won't be thar."

The big man was overconfident and really despised his adversary; in fact he did not believe that the other would dare to encounter him when the moment arrived.

A few hundred yards down the street was a vacant lot well suited for the purpose in hand, and the crowd proceeding into it formed a ring around the two champions.

The big stranger cast his well-worn slouch hat upon the ground in token of defiance, and then proceeded to roll up the sleeves of the extremely dirty flannel shirt which he wore.

The moon, round and full, shining quite brightly, gave ample light.

The butcher's preparations completed, he addressed his adversary:

"Now, young feller, step up to the capt'in's office and take your gruel like a man; and say, pick out a couple of seconds to pick you up arter I knock you down."

"Do you run a private graveyard, sir?" Mr. Bowers inquired, with a grave face, and the crowd "snickered" at the question.

"Hallo! what's up?" cried a big man, pushing his way through the throng, and the bystanders, turning, recognized the sheriff, Billy Dancer.

The nature of the little difficulty was at once explained to the official, and some few in the crowd thought that possibly he might interfere and spoil the sport, but the sheriff understood his constituents far too well to attempt anything of the kind.

"Oh, is that all?" he exclaimed. "Blessed if I didn't think that you was up to something. Well, boys, I s'pose that, according to the official position I hold, that I ought to kinder interfere, but I never like to spile sport, and if two gentl'men like to enjoy themselves with a little sparring match, provided that they play light with each other, why, I don't see that I have any call to hinder 'em."

"Good for you, Billy!" exclaimed one of the throng; "and, boys," the speaker continued, turning to the rest, "I move that the sheriff be provided with a front seat."

This resolution was at once carried unanimously, and the preparation for the contest again proceeded.

Cherokee's toilet, though rather more elaborate than his opponent's, was soon made.

He had removed his coat and vest, collar and necktie—he wore these evidences of civilization, contrary to the usual custom of the mountaineers—then tied his neat silk handkerchief tightly around his waist, and with a confident look upon his face advanced toward his opponent.

"Hol' on, hol' on!" exclaimed Bowers, excitedly; "this hyer thing will never do! Whar's your seconds and your bottle-holders? Whar's your referee—who's a-gwine to call time?"

"You, old man!" cried one of the throng; "you're posted!"

And this idea suiting the humor of the crowd, they at once proclaimed Bowers the official to preside over the encounter.

The confederates of the butcher were not slow to avail themselves of the chance, either.

"Wa-al, seein' as how this man seems to be alone, I reckon that I'll be his side-pardner on this occasion," the Yankee remarked, stepping forward.

"And I will back him, too!" the Californian cried, following the lead of the other.

"I'm almost a stranger," Cherokee observed, "but if any gentleman will oblige me—"

"Permit me to tender my services!" exclaimed the smooth-spoken Mr. Daily, stepping forward from amid the crowd. In passing up the street he had been attracted by the throng and had proceeded to investigate the matter.

"I'm sorry to trouble you."

"Oh, no trouble at all; glad to oblige you," Daily averred.

"Me, too!" said a deep, guttural voice, appertaining to a muscular, dark-faced fellow, clad in shocking bad garments, who had slouched forward in Daily's rear.

"Much obliged; and now I'm ready."

With the word Cherokee turned and faced his opponent.

And now that the two men stood stripped for the encounter, almost within arm's-length of each other, to the astonishment of the crowd they discovered that there wasn't much difference in the size of the men, after all. True, the

butcher was the heavier built of the two, but at

a glance it was easy to see that if his form was relieved of its extra weight of fat, which was decidedly a disadvantage, the man would be very nearly the same size as his antagonist.

"Time!" exclaimed Bowers.

The difference in the positions of the two as they approached each other was remarkable.

The big man, with his arms sawing to and fro, was striving to impress both his opponent and the lookers-on with the idea that he was chock-full of the boxer's science, while Cherokee, with his arms low down, right on the level of his waist, seemed to be open to a wicked blow; and it came soon, too, for the butcher, believing that he held his adversary at his mercy, collected all his strength for one tremendous stroke, intending at a single thrust to end the matter.

The big right arm drew back and then went forward, straight for Cherokee's handsome face; but it never reached its mark, for up, quick as a flash, came the sinewy arms of the threatened man, and while the left brushed the fierce stroke aside, the right, with a sharp, whip-like crack which sounded clear on the midnight air, landed right between the bully's eyes, staggering him back all in a heap.

He sat down in a dazed sort of way and stared stupidly about him.

It was a wonderful stroke, and the bystanders fairly held their breath as they watched the effect of it.

The assistants of the butcher ran to his aid and helped him to get on his feet again.

"He's too much for you, old man," the Yankee whispered in his ear; "quit afore you get hurt."

But the pride of the other would not permit him to do this, and he was reluctant to believe that the dandy chap, as he termed his opponent, could be so much his superior.

"It was only a lucky lick; jest wait till I close in with him and then see whar he'll be!" he cried, fiercely, in reply.

The Yankee shrugged his shoulders; he saw that it would be only a waste of time to attempt to argue the other out of his idea.

"Time!" ejaculated Bowers, who had been highly delighted at the results of the first round.

The butcher changed his tactics this time, and instead of attempting to spar he rushed at Cherokee like a mad bull, delivering blow after blow with all his force, and the other humored him and gave ground, deftly keeping out of reach, and then, when the butcher paused, as he did in a few moments, short of wind and unable to keep up the attack, the terrible, iron-like fists of the other played a tattoo on his fat face.

Maddened by the pain, the butcher made another rush at his nimble adversary, but Cherokee gave no ground this time; he merely parried the blows, and then, with one tremendous hit, caught the other full in the stomach, right above the belt.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN UNEXPECTED EVENT.

It was a most terrible whack, for the butcher was fat and the fist of Cherokee like iron, and the awful dig that the former received in the "bread-basket" completely took the wind out of him; over he went, sitting down, the very picture of misery, with a vigorous "ough"—an exclamation that he did not design to make.

It was funny; such contests are generally brutal; but this one was simply ridiculous. The big man was so evidently overmatched, so completely at the mercy of his antagonist that one and all perceived, even at this early stage of the game, that, to use the old saying, he had no business with Cherokee.

In fact, one of the bystanders offered in the most reckless manner to bet a thousand dollars to a cent that Cherokee would win.

"If I wasn't a judge in this hyer thing, I'd take you in, a'most, jest to see you put your money up," Mr. Bowers observed. No mean judge of men and matters in the Northern wilds, he had safely calculated that the bold better hadn't a thousand cents let alone dollars.

The crowd laughed and Bowers chuckled at having thus quickly squelched the man of wealth.

The two seconds assisted the big man to rise. "I thought that you had better grit," the Yankee whispered in the ear of the discomfited boxer.

"Bah! what are fists good for!" cried the Californian, who, after the fashion of his race, was totally ignorant of the use of Nature's weapons. "The knife or pistol, steel or lead, those are the things for a man to use."

"I reckon that in this case it is just as well that our pardner trusted to his fists, for I have an idee that this cuss is as handy with his weapons as he is with his hands; and if that is so, jest about this time we would have been measuring our pard hyer fur a pine box, if he had gone in on steel or lead."

"If I could once close in on him I would kill him!" the butcher growled.

"Yes, but that ain't his little game," the Yankee retorted, grimly.

"Time!" exclaimed Bowers; he was anxious to see more fun.

But the butcher in this case was not in the least bit of a hurry; he had got enough and he was wise enough to know it. At last he fully comprehended that he was no match at fisticuffs with the cool and quiet Cherokee.

"I cry quits!" he answered, doggedly. "I'm satisfied, I am!"

"Why, gentle friend, you ain't a-going to throw up the sponge in this hyer way?" demanded Bowers, in astonishment. "Get out! You kin stand a heap more pounding. We ain't half had the worth of our money yet."

"Well, I have," responded the other. "I say ag'in, I'm satisfied."

And the bystanders shook their heads wisely and nodded to each other, "No wonder!" The conclusion to which the man had come, considering the battering which he had received, did not in the least surprise them, although they set the butcher down as a cur for "quitting" so quickly.

"You are completely satisfied, then?" Cherokee queried.

"I reckon that I am," the other growled.

"And you don't want any more?"

"No."

"Not for Joseph—no sugar in mine!" Bowers suggested, facetiously.

"But I am not satisfied!" Cherokee exclaimed, abruptly, stepping forward and confronting his antagonist, while the crowd looked on in astonishment.

"Wot do you mean?" the butcher asked, in surprise.

"You demanded satisfaction and you got it; now I want satisfaction and I mean to have it!"

The other stared stupidly at the speaker.

"You are a scoundrel and a liar, and I mean that you shall take back what you said about that little girl!" and as he uttered the words Cherokee's face assumed such a threatening expression that the butcher involuntarily stepped back.

This was altogether unexpected.

"Take back wot I said?"

"Yes, take it back or I'll hammer you until you can't stand," and Cherokee raised his terrible right arm, which had already done such wonderful execution, threateningly.

"Hold on, pard!" cried the Yankee; "I reckon that the thing ought to be called settled, considering as how our man gives in whipped. What more kin you ask?"

"Let him take back what he said about the girl," Cherokee answered, his tone quite fierce. "He lies and he knows that he lies, and I'm going to make him own up to it before I get through with him. He is not the girl's husband; she is not his wife and never has been; she did not run away from him in Frisco! Let him own the truth or I'll hammer it out of him."

And Cherokee made another step toward the butcher, who as speedily retreated.

"I 'peal to the crowd!" cried the Yankee, perceiving that Cherokee was in earnest, and that either his man had to retreat or else "face the music again," which he fully understood the butcher would not do if he could possibly avoid it.

"I 'peal to the crowd!" the Yankee repeated; "is this hyer thing the square deal now? My man owns up that he's got enough, and hadn't that ought to settle it?"

"No-sir-ee!" cried Bowers, promptly; "fight or acknowledge the corn! Ain't that korect, boys?"

And the "boys" to a man declared that it was.

There was no alternative; either face the iron fists of the girl's champion again or acknowledge that his accusation was a gross falsehood; the butcher could choose either horn of the dilemma that suited him.

"Give me some show for my money!" the vanquished man cried, doggedly. "I ain't used to fist-fighting, anyway."

"I will accommodate you, sir, in any fashion that you choose—fists, knives, pistols, rifles, revolvers, anything that suits your fancy, but settled I am determined this matter shall be before either of us leaves this spot."

"Why don't you let the man go?" called out a voice from amid the crowd.

Cherokee had wonderful ears, and as he had heard the voice before he had no difficulty in deciding in regard to its ownership now.

"Oh, are you there, Mr. Breckford?" he exclaimed. "Come forward, man, and back up your tool. I begin to believe now that the girl was right, and that this is all a conspiracy to drive her out of the town; but, come right out, sir, and say what you have to say openly; don't skulk in a crowd as if you were ashamed of your own shadow."

Thus boldly called upon the postmaster couldn't very well remain in the background, and so he promptly came to the front.

"It was I that spoke," he said, perceiving that it was best to put a bold face on the matter. "and, as I said before, why don't you let the man alone? He acknowledges satisfaction, and that ought to content you."

"Yes, but it don't," Cherokee replied, firmly. "This man is a villainous liar, and he shall own up before I get through with him. He either takes back what he has said or else I'll put him through."

Brockford saw that it would be useless to attempt to turn the victor from his way, but, as he looked upon the resolute face of Cherokee the idea which had previously entered his mind became stronger and stronger, and so being a man of determined action he at once came to the conclusion in regard to the best course to be pursued in the matter.

"Well, it's none of my business, and so I wash my hands of the matter," and he turned back into the crowd again, but he had a plainly defined purpose in so doing, and moving slowly through the throng took up a position right behind the sheriff, Billy Dancer, with whom he entered into conversation.

Cherokee, deceived into the belief that the postmaster had given up the game, an opinion shared, too, by the four confederates, turned his attention again to the butcher.

That worthy was in a terrible stew; it galled him to the very quick to acknowledge openly that he had lied about the girl, but how to escape from making the admission he knew not. His antagonist was evidently deeply in earnest; it was either confess or fight, and he had no taste for another trial of the other's skill after what he had already experienced.

"Wot shall I do?" he growled, to the Yankee. "Give it up as a bad job," replied the other. "It's no use; he's too much for you—give it up, and call it half a day."

"Come, decide! I'm tired of waiting!" Cherokee cried, menacingly.

"Wot is it you want?" the discomfited bully asked, sulkily.

"Own up that you lied about the girl. You don't know her; she is no wife of yours."

"Wa-al, mebbe she ain't," the fellow mumbled, reluctantly.

"You never saw her in Frisco?"

"Mebbe I didn't."

"And the story that she was once your wife and run away from you is all a lie from beginning to end, isn't it?"

"Mebbe it is."

"A candid confession is good for the soul they say, and now that you have made a clean breast of it you ought to feel better."

A smothered growl was the butcher's only reply.

"Well, gentlemen, I hope that you all feel satisfied now that the girl spoke the truth when she said that she had no knowledge whatever of this fellow; and as for myself I think that there was a good deal of truth in her assertion that there is a conspiracy on foot to drive her out of this town, and I intend to make it my business to look into the matter."

By this time Brockford had arranged the details of the scheme which he had had in his mind when he sought the sheriff and that gentleman at once proceeded to carry it out.

With drawn and cocked revolver he stepped forward toward Cherokee.

"Throw up your hands!" he cried; "surrender, for you are my prisoner!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE POSTMASTER'S SUSPICION.

The crowd were taken by surprise at this entirely unexpected proceeding, and in wonder they looked at the sheriff.

That gentleman was evidently fully in earnest, for he had Cherokee covered with his weapon, and Brockford, close behind him, also had his revolver out.

Cherokee, after delivering his speech to the crowd, had turned with the intention of assuming his garments again, but of course had halted abruptly at Dancer's command.

"What do you mean, and who are you?" he asked: "why should I surrender to you?"

"Because I'm the sheriff of this hyer county, William Dancer by name, and you are my prisoner, because there's a reward of a thousand dollars offered for you, Dick Talbot!"

The miners stared, and most of them drew a long breath at this announcement.

Was this cool, quiet, but resolute and skilful boxer indeed the renowned Captain Dick Talbot, the King of the Road, the Death Shot of Shasta—the most wonderful man, in all particulars, that had ever set foot in northern California?

Cherokee laughed. "Why, sheriff, I reckon that you're barking up the wrong tree, hyer," he said, quite good-naturedly.

"Oh, no! I know you, and I've been on the look-out for you for some time. I knew that you couldn't keep out of this town."

"But the idea that I am Dick Talbot—ridiculous!"

"Oh! it ain't to be thought of for a moment!" Bowers exclaimed. "Why, Dancing Billy, I've knowed this hyer gent for an age of shoe-leather. He Injun Dick—bold Captain Talbot! No, sir-ee! no more than I am!"

"You shut up!" cried the sheriff, roughly, who was not at all pleased with the familiarity of the hummer, in interfering in the matter, nor

with the liberty which the jovial Mr. Bowers had taken with his name. "Nobody asks you to stick your spoon in this soup, and I reckon that we kin git along without your assistance."

"But, Billy, my bold buccaner, it ain't a bluff," Bowers persisted, not in the least abashed by the rebuff. "I tell yer, I'm pos'ed, I am! Why, I knowed Talbot in the old time hyer like as if he was my brother; many is the social drink and the quiet game of keards that we have had together, and to take Cherokee, hyer, my ole side-rardner, fur him, why, brigadier-general, you're clean gone!"

Dancer had timed his movement so well that he had the other foul. He was weaponless, apparently, though, in truth, he had a little six-shooter concealed in his bosom, but with the cocked revolver of the sheriff leveled full at his heart, there was no chance for him to possess himself of the weapon, if he had desired so to do.

But, Cherokee hadn't the slightest idea of offering resistance. He felt perfectly sure that it could not be proved that he was Injun Dick, and therefore he was quite willing to go quietly with his captor.

"Oh, I surrender, sheriff," he said. "I don't know what put the idea that I am Dick Talbot into your head, but I reckon that I won't have much trouble in proving that I am not. It's some years since I lived in Cinnabar City, but there must be some few in the town who will be able to remember me."

"I do, fur one!" Bowers exclaimed, loudly. "I sw'ar on a stack of Bibles as big as a meeting-house, that when you lived in this hyer town, a few years ago, your name was Cherokee, and the man wot denies it is a liar and a goat-thief!" and he glared defiantly at the sheriff, as he made this sweeping accusation.

"You talk too much with your mouth!" Dancer answered, in a rage. "You had better keep it shut or you'll catch cold."

"I reckon that this hyer is a free country, and that our forefathers didn't fight, bleed and kick the bucket fur nothin'," the hummer retorted, defiantly. "It will take a derrick to shut my mouth, my noble dook, when me blood is up!"

By this time the chief of police of the town, accompanied by a couple of the night patrol, arrived upon the scene of action, attracted by the report that a first-class row was brewing, and to their care the sheriff delivered the prisoner. Dancer also tapped Daily on the shoulder, and told him that, for the present, he should be obliged to take him into custody, on account of being found in company with the accused.

"Bless me!" exclaimed the old sport, annoyed at the turn affairs had taken, and believing that he could see Brockford's hand in this proceeding; "I know absolutely nothing whatever of the man! He is a total stranger to me! I never saw him before in my life, and it was only just by accident that I happened to be passing by when the crowd attracted my attention, and I stopped in order to ascertain what the matter was, and seeing that the gentleman was a stranger, I volunteered to aid him."

"Oh, it will be all right; a mere matter of form," Dancer responded; "but you'll have to come along at present. There'll be an examination right away, and then, of course, you'll be discharged."

Daily grumbled, but perforce was obliged to go along.

The officials, with their prisoners, at once proceeded direct to the jail. At Brockford's suggestion, Dancer had looked around for the other second to Cherokee, but he had prudently made himself scarce, and all that the sheriff could learn in regard to him was that he was a dark-faced stranger, dressed roughly.

"One of Talbot's gang, no doubt," Brockford observed, and the sheriff nodded assent.

The prisoners were lodged in jail, and were comforted with the information that the Governor would come, the first thing in the morning, to see if he could identify Cherokee as Talbot.

Meanwhile the report went rapidly around town that the famous Injun Dick had been taken by the sheriff and was held in custody vile; but Bowers, who was perambulating from saloon to saloon, indignantly repudiated the idea.

"He—that man, Dick Talbot? No, sir-ee, no more nor I am, and you kin bet your duets freely on it!" he cried, every time that the idea was advanced in his presence, and the doubt that the hummer felt was general throughout the town in the minds of the people.

It did not appear reasonable that a man with a price upon his head should boldly run his neck into the hangman's noose by coming into the very town where his chief enemy, the Governor, abided.

It was but a vague suspicion that had entered the mind of the postmaster that the bold stranger, who had taken upon his shoulders the quarrel of the dancing-girl, was indeed the hero of the foot-hills and of the wild ravines nestling close to Shasta's snow-crowned peak; but the more he saw of him the stronger the suspicion became, despite the vigorous protest of Joe Bowers; but Brockford did not put a great deal of faith in the hummer. He was more inclined to trust to his own wisdom than in the vagrant's

knowledge. Besides, he had a lurking doubt of the loud-talking Mr. Bowers; he might, indeed, keep faith if he was well paid, but Brockford did not feel sure on that point.

At any rate the imprisonment of the stranger could do no harm. If he was the outlaw, with whose daring deeds all California had rung, the Governor would be pretty sure to be able to identify him; if he was not, he could be discharged and no harm would be done; Justice, being blind, was apt to make just such mistakes once in a while; and then, too, the postmaster had got Daily into his clutches, and he had a little scheme in regard to him which he fancied would be pretty apt to bring the veteran sharp to terms so far as his daughter, the lovely Cassy, was concerned; for Brockford was determined to have the girl, cost what it might. The postmaster was a bold fellow, and not one to count the obstacles in his way; therefore at right he retired to rest pretty well satisfied with the way in which matters and things were progressing.

Quite a number of people had pestered the jailer who had the prisoners in charge by visiting the lock-up, on purpose to ask if the news was true and that the famous Dick Talbot really was captured.

And to one and all the jailer made reply, in Kentucky style:

"I'd never tell you; mebbe it is and mebbe it isn't. Durned ef I know."

And after some twenty or thirty had pestered him with questions, he began to get annoyed and to give short answers; and when, close on midnight, a little dark figure came tapping at the door just as the jailer was taking a few last whiffs of his pipe, preparatory to going to bed, he got angry.

"Go 'long with yer!" he cried; "go home, fenny, and go to bed; this ain't any time to be off your roost."

"But I want to speak to you, particular," cried a clear, sweet voice, and the jailer perceived at once that the speaker was a woman.

The keeper of the prison was only human, and so he opened the little wicket in the door, which was so contrived that applicants for entry could be examined without opening the portal.

"Well, wot is it?" he asked, gruffly.

"I want to talk to one of the prisoners," and the speaker kept her face so hooded with the dark cloak she wore that her features could not be seen.

"Which one?"

"The man that is accused of being Dick Talbot."

"Well, miss, it can't be did," the jailer responded.

"It must be arranged; what harm will it do to any one to allow me to have ten minutes' conversation with him?"

"It's ag'inst the rules, you know."

"But who is to know it but you and I and he?"

"If it should be found out, I'd get the sack!"

"I'll give you a twenty-dollar gold-piece for ten minutes' talk with him," she exclaimed, pressing the coin into the hand of the jailer, "and no one can know anything about it."

CHAPTER XX.

A WOMAN'S FAITH.

TWENTY-DOLLAR gold-pieces do not grow upon every bush, and the jailer eyed the yellow boy with an itching palm.

Why should he not take it? As the woman justly said, what harm was there in letting her have ten minutes' conversation with the prisoner, and who was to know anything about it, anyway? If he took the money he was twenty dollars richer, that was certain.

The woman who hesitates is lost they say; and man is the son of woman.

The jailer deliberated—and yielded.

"Well, I s'pose that ther won't be much harm done if I let you come in," he remarked, consigning the gold-piece to his pocket as he spoke; "but, I say, who are you, anyway?"

For reply the applicant pushed back the hood from her face, exposing the pretty features of Nic of the Bella Union.

"Oho!" the jailer cried: "and you're the gal that he had the fight at out to-night! I heard all about it, although I didn't see it. Well, it's only natural that you should want to see him, for they do tell me he hammered that cuss that pestered you like lightning; they say it was a humming fight."

Then the jailer swung the door open and allowed the girl to enter.

Providing himself with a candle he conducted her to the apartment where the prisoner was confined.

Cinnabar City jail was not a very elaborately-constructed building, and it was not particularly well adapted for holding in safe confinement shrewd and desperate men, and more than one prisoner when shown into his prison-pen by the jailer, had remarked, after a glance at the place, that it was only his—the prisoner's—respect for the law that kept him from kicking the whole "end-board" out of the rotten corner.

Cherokee was extended upon the rude bench

with which his apartment was provided when the jailer unlocked the door and showed the girl into the room, and he rose to a sitting posture.

The jailer placed the candle upon the table, cautioned the girl that in ten minutes' time he should come to let her out, and then withdrew.

"Oh, sir, for my sake you have got yourself into a terrible situation!" she exclaimed, anxiously, the moment they were alone together.

"Oh, no, I reckon that I ain't in any particular danger," he replied, his eyes occupied with the pretty face of the girl.

"You don't know this man as well as I do!" she cried, impulsively.

"To whom do you refer?"

"Brockford! he is a base, black-hearted villain!"

"Well, I should imagine from what I have seen of him that he is a man who wouldn't hesitate much at anything; but he is almost a stranger to me."

"I know him!" she exclaimed, vehemently; "know him to my sorrow. I am only a poor actress, you know, hardly that either, for I am nothing but a variety girl, and get my living by singing and dancing in variety theaters, where few ladies go; but I have always tried to be a good girl, and I defy any one to say anything with truth against my good name. This man is the cause of my being here. He made my acquaintance in San Francisco; he used to fairly haunt the theater where I worked, the Bella Union, and at last he managed to make my acquaintance. He professed great admiration for me, and told me what a fine home he had up here, and what a great man he was in the town."

"Well, sir, I was all alone in the world, not a relative on earth, and when this man wanted me to be his wife I was weak enough to think seriously about selling myself to him, for that is really what it is when a girl doesn't love a man and becomes his wife merely to secure a good home and so protect herself from want. But, I am naturally a little sharp, and so I made up my mind that I would come up here and see just what kind of a man he was when he was at home before I accepted his offer. The manager of the Bella Union saloon here had made me quite good offers to come and work for him, and so, at last, I accepted an engagement with him, and came up here. I will own frankly that I thought this man was a little foolish in his affection for me, and was willing to overlook the fact that I was a stage performer; but, after I got up here, I found that he was much more of a knave than a fool, and that he had no idea whatever of keeping his promises. He had merely amused himself with me, and when he found that I expected him to keep his promises he laughed at me. Of course I was wild! You see, sir, I never had much bringing up, but grew like a weed, uncared for and allowed to go my own way, the slave to my own sweet will. I went right after him, and happened, by accident, to discover that he was paying attention to the daughter of the old gentleman who came forward to your assistance last night, Mr. Daily."

"Ah, that was Mr. Daily, eh?" Cherokee exclaimed. He remembered the name of the man reputed to be the best poker-player in the town.

"Yes, sir."

"How did you happen to know anything about his coming forward to assist me?"

"Why, I saw the whole of it," she answered, immediately. "I was very grateful, indeed, to you for taking the part of a helpless girl—although I am not quite so helpless as one might imagine, for I have a six-shooter, and I know how to use it—and when I saw you go out with that big brute, I feared that it was all a plan to get you away so that he and his gang could murder you. I wasn't going to stay behind and endure the suspense; so I slipped on the boy's dress that I wear on the stage sometimes, and followed after the crowd, and so it happened that I saw the whole affair. But now, as time presses, I must come at once to the errand upon which I came. I don't know whether you are Captain Dick Talbot or not, nor do I care; but I do know that I'm going to try to get you out of this."

"Oh, aid me to escape?" and Cherokee looked with curiosity into the expressive face of the girl.

"Yes; before morning dawns you can be many miles from here. Underneath my waterproof and dress I have on my boy's suit and I have a wig which very nearly resembles my own hair. You can put on my things, pull the wig down over your eyes, and the hood of the waterproof over it, and with your handkerchief to your eyes pretend to cry. You can easily get into the entry without the jailer discovering the cheat, for he is a dull fool of a fellow, and perhaps you can get completely out of the building; any way, if you once get out into the entry you will be able to cope with the jailer. I've got a revolver for you and a box of cartridges."

Cherokee laughed.

"You're a thoughtful little woman!" he exclaimed.

"You shall find that I'm a grateful one," she replied, promptly.

"And I'm sorry that I do not think it is wise for me to accept your offer."

"Why not?" she exclaimed, a look of amazement upon her face.

"Because I deny that I am the party that I am taken to be, and defy the whole world to prove that I am Captain Dick Talbot."

"Yes, I see; strong in the confidence of your innocence, you will remain and fight it out!"

"That's my programme!"

"But, if there is any way in which I can serve you, you will let me know?" she said, eagerly.

"Most certainly; only don't consider you owe me anything, because you do not. I will frankly admit to you, that, apart from the natural desire any decent man feels to interfere when he sees a woman abused, I had reason to believe that this Brockford is an enemy of mine, and that, although I do not know him, nor he me, yet in an underhand way, he is trying to do me a mischief. That is one reason why I espoused a quarrel not my own."

"I don't care what the reason was!" the girl declared, impulsively. "You are a noble, generous fellow, and while I live I shall never forget your kindness."

"Don't make rash promises," Cherokee remarked, a peculiar sad smile upon his face. "Human life is quite long, sometimes, but human memory quite short."

"If I live to be a hundred, I am sure the gratitude I now feel for the service you have done me, will never fade or die; each succeeding year will only serve to make the remembrance fresher and brighter."

"I trust so," and yet even as the man spoke, he doubted.

A heavy footstep sounded in the hall without. "The ten minutes are up, and there is the jailer!" the girl exclaimed, hurriedly. "Excuse the question—but this is no time for ceremony—have you plenty of money?"

"Yes, plenty."

"Because if you haven't, I have, and whatever I have is yours for the asking."

"Don't make rash promises; if I get out of this scrape all right I might take it into my head to ask for you," he said, extending his hand to grasp the palm which she had held out in a farewell salutation.

A deep blush swept rapidly over the face of the girl, but she clasped his hand firmly and looked him straight in the eye.

"When you ask, be sure I shall not forget my words," she replied, with evident emotion.

The entrance of the jailer cut short all further conversation.

"Come, you must get out of hyer!" he exclaimed; "time's up."

"Good-by; don't forget what I've said," and then she passed out into the hall.

"These women are some when they gets a-go-in!" the jailer remarked with a wink to the prisoner, as he took the candle from the table. "Wa-al, good-night and pleasant dreams to you."

Cherokee was left alone to his reflections. Again was he engaged in a life-and-death struggle, and again had a young and pretty girl stepped forward into his path.

CHAPTER XXI.

BROCKFORD'S ULTIMATUM.

THE postmaster was a firm believer in a bold game. The weaker your hand the stronger must be the front presented, and when you really do hold good cards, play them for all they are worth. Acting upon this principle, he at once seized upon the chance to get the father of the beautiful Cassandra into his power.

Even in our great eastern cities the law can be used by men rich in influence as a means of attack upon a less fortunate enemy. Law does not always mean justice, and on the Californian frontier, the boundary line between civilization and the wild solitudes of the mountains, it was an easy thing for one situated as Brockford was to abuse the powers of the law.

Daily was in the company of the man accused of being the famous Captain Dick Talbot. How easy then to cry out that he was one of Talbot's band who had participated in the bold attack upon the railway train!

Not so easy to prove that same, though, but the postmaster had an idea in regard to that point; he had a plan in his head which he thought would be apt to get the veteran card-sharp into a heap of trouble unless he promised compliance with his—Brockford's—wishes.

And being also a firm believer in the good old adage that there was nothing like striking when the iron was hot, he, after seeing the two prisoners safely lodged in jail, proceeded at once to the house occupied by Daily and his daughter.

A light shone through the curtained window, showing that the inmates had not yet retired to rest.

"Ah, these gamblers' wives and daughters keep many sad vigils," Brockford muttered, as he tapped at the door.

The summons was soon answered; the visitor heard the sound of footsteps within the house approaching the door, and the sweet voice of the girl asked:

"Is that you, father?"

"No, miss, it is not your father; it is I, Mr. Brockford, the postmaster!" he answered.

"If you wish to see my father he is not in yet," the girl said, after a slight pause. It was evident that she was surprised at the call.

"Yes, miss, I know that your father is not in; he has just been carried to jail, and that is the reason that I came to see you. I thought that you had better be informed of the matter, and that it would be as well that a friend should bring the news as to leave the disagreeable task to a stranger."

The door opened quickly enough now, and Cassandra appeared, her face expressive in astonishment.

"My father in jail!" she exclaimed, her eyes dilating; "what has happened?"

"If you will permit me to enter, Miss Daily," he said, persuasively, "I will explain the whole matter, for it is quite a long story, and my standing here at this late hour might provoke remark."

For a moment the girl hesitated, for she had a terrible dislike to the speaker, but then she reflected that his suggestion in regard to what people might say was correct, and so, she reluctantly admitted the postmaster.

She brought a chair for him and then going to the door leading into the room of the stout Irish serving maid, Norah—who, to use the mountain parlance, "ran" the house for the Dailys—called out:

"Do not be alarmed, Norah; it is only Mr. Brockford."

The postmaster understood the meaning of this little bit of strategy well enough. It was to show him that she was not alone in the house.

Simple as the dove, yet not without some of the wiles of the serpent was the maiden.

"Not the slightest cause for alarm, I assure you," he at once hastened to remark in his smoothest tones. "In fact, before we get through with this very unpleasant little bit of business I feel sure, Miss Daily, you will be convinced that you haven't a warmer friend in the world than myself."

"Indeed I hope so, sir," the girl replied, but there was a troubled expression upon her face which plainly betrayed that her mind was far from being at ease, notwithstanding his words.

"You will find that it is the truth, miss," he went on, "and although I am very sorry indeed that your father has fallen into so much trouble, yet I am compelled to rejoice that an opportunity has arisen to enable me to show that my friendship for you is not all lip-service, but comes straight from the heart."

"What is the trouble in which my father is involved?" she demanded, going directly to the point, for she liked neither the matter nor the manner of the speaker.

"He has been arrested upon a very serious charge."

The girl opened her big, blue eyes very wide at this information, for her gentle, kind old father, the quietest and best-natured old gentleman in the world, in her opinion, seemed to be the last man possible to become involved in any serious difficulty.

"Yes, Miss Cassandra, he has been arrested in the company of the notorious Dick Talbot and has been lodged in jail, charged with being an accomplice of that remarkable outlaw. I presume that you know something of this Injun Dick, as he is commonly termed?"

"Yes, my father told me about his escape from the officers here and his attack upon the railway train, but the idea of my father knowing anything of this man or of his being an accomplice of his is really ridiculous!"

The girl spoke exactly as she thought, and the serious charge which had been brought against her father, and under which he had been arrested, did not affect her in the least, for she felt perfectly sure not only that he was innocent of all knowledge of the daring king of the road but that he would easily be able to prove that such was the fact.

The confidence of the girl annoyed Brockford. She was apparently blind to the terrible danger which threatened her sire.

"Heaven forbid, miss, that I should do or say anything to destroy the confidence which, naturally, you feel in regard to your father's innocence, but as your friend—and his, too—it is my duty to tell you that no matter whether he is innocent or guilty, he is in a position of great peril. He was arrested in the company of Talbot—he had come openly forward to espouse his side in a quarrel in which he had become involved in the town, and, in fact, the citizens at large are fully convinced that he is a member of the outlaw's gang, and that he has come into this town in the disguise of a speculator expressly to spy out favorable opportunities for plunder."

"Oh! the idea is utterly absurd!" the girl exclaimed, indignantly. "My father is the kindest and most gentle of men! In all the time that we have lived in California, nearly fifteen years now, I have never known him to be concerned in the slightest trouble."

"My dear Miss Cassandra, you must remember that I am not passing an opinion upon your father's guilt or innocence at all," he replied. "I am only endeavoring to convey to you the

impression which exists in the town in regard to him, so that you will be able to understand the very great danger he is in. The people at large fully and firmly believe that he is a member of Talbot's dreaded gang; they know that Captain Dick bears this town of Cinnabar no very good will; in short, a perpetual vendetta exists between this outlaw and the people of this valley; and when men are laboring under the influence of a terrible fear they are not apt to be very liberal. Your father was arrested in Talbot's company; he came freely and openly forward to back the road-agent, and there is a man in the town who is willing to bear evidence that he is one of the principal members of Talbot's band."

"The villain!" Cassandra cried, spiritedly; "what cause of malice has he against my poor father to induce him to be willing to peril his soul by such a lie?"

"None at all, miss; he is a perfect stranger to your father, and states that he only comes forward to denounce him because he feels that it is his duty to do so."

"My father can easily prove that he is unjustly accused!" the girl persisted, not in the least affected, as Brockford had hoped that she would be. He believed that, womanlike, she would yield to tears and despair; but she had such a thorough belief in her sire's innocence, it was impossible to make her comprehend that all the world believed him to be guilty."

"My dear Miss Daily, if your father was going to have a fair chance to prove his innocence it would be all right; but the citizens are talking about calling upon Judge Lynch, and in case the mob do rise your father, with this Talbot, will most certainly be hung to the first tree without the benefit of judge or jury."

"The wretches! they surely will not dare!"

"A mob will dare almost anything! Why, miss, you have no idea of the way the citizens are wrought up in regard to this matter. This Talbot is a red-handed murderer, and so far he has bid defiance to all laws; but now that he is safely caged the men of the town think the quicker he is strung up the better. I think the mob will call on Judge Lynch and seize the jail before morning, and if they do—if they once get their clutches on Talbot and your father, who they have an idea is the outlaw's right-hand man, nothing on earth can save them. Now then I have a plan and that is why I came to see you at this unseasonable hour. The jailer is a personal friend of mine; in fact, I have him under my thumb, and I can arrange with him so that your father can slip out and escape the mob. Of course I am taking a great risk upon my shoulders, and, Miss Cassandra, may I dare to hope that I may be repaid for that risk?"

Skillfully as the trickster had planned yet the victim suspected him.

"A good action seldom fails of reward in this world," she replied. "More than that I feel that I ought not to say."

"Cheered by such encouragement, then, I will at once go forth upon my mission!" he exclaimed, and taking his leave departed, and, on reaching the outer air, cursed, vigorously, the failure of his cunning scheme.

CHAPTER XXII.

ANOTHER TACK.

ALTHOUGH baffled, Brockford was by no means beaten; no man of straw was he to be turned from his way by any obstacle so weak as a woman's whim.

"I was a fool to bother with the girl," he muttered, as he walked along the almost deserted street, heading straight toward the jail. "She is only a child and like wax in the hands of that old rascal, her father. I've got him in a hole this time though, and my luck must be an infernal sight worse than I think it is if I don't make him dance to my tune. He will be a bigger fool than I take him to be if he doesn't come to some arrangement with me now, considering the grime that I have got on him."

Brockford arrived at the jail just about five minutes after the girl had been admitted, and, accosting the wretch who kept the keys of this modern gate to Satan's realm, informed him that he desired to have speech with old Daily.

"Oh, I can't do it, Cap!" the jailer replied. "It's clear as 'in' orders, you know."

"You know who I am?"

"Oh, yes, of course; and if thar's any man in this hyer burg that I would go far to do a favor for, you're the one; but thar's a heap sight of responsibility a-resting onto me now. I can't be too keerful with this hyer King of the Road in my custody."

Brockford understood at once that, seeing the force of the situation, the jailer was after a "stake," and was determined to have it, and so, reluctantly, he drew out a five-dollar gold-piece and tendered it to the man in authority.

"Here, this will make it all right, won't it?"

"Wa-al now, Cap, seeing as how it is you, I s'pose that I'll have to let you slide in" the other replied, with a grin, pocketing the gold-piece as he spoke.

He at once conducted Brockford to the cell occupied by Daily; taking a lighted candle with

him from the main hall of the jail so that the pair might have light for their conference.

"When you get through, sing out," he said, as he withdrew.

Daily, a remarkably evenly-balanced man, one accustomed to take the world as it came without complaining, had wrapped himself in his blanket and was reposing at full length upon the rude bunk, but upon the entrance of his visitor he sat up and surveyed him with a questioning air.

"Rough quarters," Brockford remarked, helping himself to the solitary stool which, with the bunk, comprised the furniture of the room.

"Yes, but it might be worse," the other replied, philosophically.

"You are in a tight place."

"Do you think so?" And the speaker put the question as unconcernedly as though he hadn't the slightest interest in the matter.

"A mighty tight place, and I don't see how you are going to get out of it, unless I let up on you."

"Well, what do you intend to do in the premises?"

"That depends entirely upon you."

"Is that so?" and, although the question was earnestly put and the speaker's face was grave, yet Brockford felt that the old man was "chaffing" him.

"Now, Daily, I'll come right to the point, for I'm a man of few words and generally a pretty plain speaker!" the postmaster exclaimed. "You know what I'm after, well enough. Your daughter is a mighty fine girl, and I want her. I've got you in a hole, and I don't intend that you shall get out unless you yield to my wishes in this matter."

"You didn't lie when you said that you were a very plain speaker," the old man commented.

"Well, what do you intend to do about it?" Brockford asked, roughly.

"I don't really know."

"Mind! this is a hanging matter as far as you are concerned!" Brockford cautioned. "I've got a witness who is prepared to swear that you are one of the principal members of Dick Talbot's gang—"

"And this valuable witness will swear that I am not, if you say so!" interrupted the old man, quickly.

"That is the English of it, sir!"

"What do you want me to do?"

"You know well enough. I want Cass."

"Yes; but suppose that I can't give her to you? The girl has a will of her own, you know; she's no child, and I must say, although the truth may not be very agreeable to you, that she can't really bear the sight of you."

"Oh, nonsense!" Brockford replied; "she'll get over that once I get hold of her."

"Yes, but she is not going to let you get hold of her—that is, not if she can help herself."

"It has been my little game to put her so that she couldn't help herself," the postmaster confessed; "and I flatter myself that I shall make my point. The whole matter lies in a nutshell: I've got you foul; your life or death depends upon her decision. If she agrees to accept me for her husband, I'll get you out; if she refuses, I'll hang you as sure as shooting; you can take your choice."

"You don't know my daughter, Mr. Brockford," the prisoner replied. "You will never be able to make her believe that I am in any immediate danger. She knows well enough that I am not one of the road-agents, and she will never bring herself to think that such an accusation against me can stand. You planned your little game first-rate, Brockford, but you didn't take one fact into consideration—the unbounded faith of a good, pure girl in her father."

"A nice sort of a life you've led for her to have any such faith!" the other exclaimed, bluntly.

"My dear Mr. Brockford, it is quite plain to me that you don't know much about me, or you wouldn't make such a remark as that," the old man answered, in the most cheerful way. "It is quite true that I do handle the pasteboards for a living, but I do it in a gentlemanly sort of way; you never heard of a man about my size being mixed up in any broils or fights; although in an emergency it is quite possible that I can handle the tools of war with the best of them. My girl knows me only as a speculator, and I do speculate when I see a good chance to make money. She knows that I play cards sometimes, play for money, too, just to make the game interesting, you know; but then, there's no harm in that; almost everybody on this Pacific slope indulges once in a while; but as to making her believe that I am nothing but a common card-sharp, why, my dear sir, you might as well attempt to whistle the snow off the top of old Shasta."

"Well, I'll have to hang you, that's all!" exclaimed Brockford, brutally, rising in anger.

"I'll go you a hundred dollars to fifty that you don't!" the old man cried, promptly.

"Before you're four-and-twenty hours older I'll have Judge Lynch after you with a rope, and when you are out of the way, what will save your girl, alone and unprotected, from

What will save her? Why, her own cow-

age and resolution," the father replied, not in the least discomfited by the threats of the other. "Brockford, you don't know my beauty; if you should succeed in hanging me, which I doubt, and then try any of your games on her, she'd kill you with her own hand, just as sure as you stand there."

"She will have a chance to try!" the postmaster observed, fiercely, terribly annoyed as he was at the ill-success of his plans.

He called for the jailer; that worthy came and escorted him to the open air again.

"Anything I kin do for you, Cap, you know!" he called out, "don't be afeard to sling it at me."

And as Brockford's tall form disappeared in the darkness, the jailer peered earnestly about.

"I wonder of thar is any other galoot what wants to 'see' me to-night," he muttered. "This hyer has been a fat 'strike'."

But the jailer's quest was in vain; no other pilgrim came forward and proffered wealth for an interview with the prisoners under his charge, and so, reluctantly, he barred the outer portal again. But another bonanza awaited him within the walls of the lock-up, for old Daily summoned him and offered five dollars for the privilege of a few minutes' talk with the man accused of being Dick Talbot, and the jailer, whose greed increased by what it fed on, instantly accepted, and so Daily was conducted to Cherokee's cell and the jailer locked him in.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Cherokee, in greeting. "I'm downright sorry, my friend, that I've got you mixed up in this affair."

"Oh, don't mention it; you were a stranger, and as I fancied that you were in the same line of business as myself, I thought that it was my duty to back you up; but, since I have got myself into a scrape on your account, I think it is only right that you should help me a little, if things turn out badly."

"You may command me, even to the risk of life!" Cherokee replied, promptly.

"Much obliged. Now, listen to the lay-out of the game," and then, briefly, Daily explained how he was situated in regard to Brockford, and the threats which that gentleman had made.

"Now, then," he said, in conclusion, "if he has got me in a hobble, and should be able to compass my death, or to have me locked up for a term of years, if you get out of this scrape, or if you have powerful outside influences that you can control, do me the favor to look after my girl and to baffle the plans of this man."

"You may rely upon me, sir, as trustfully as though I were her brother!" Cherokee assured.

This was all that Daily wanted, and so, after a few more words of unimportant conversation, he called the jailer and was conducted back to his own cell.

Again Cherokee sought his bunk, but little sleep was he destined to get that night, for in twenty minutes more he was again roused by the entrance of the jailer conducting the postmaster, the sheriff, and Dick Talbot's mortal foe, the Governor of the State!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE RECOGNITION.

BROCKFORD, the Governor, and Dancer advanced into the cell; the jailer remained in the doorway and behind him appeared the stalwart forms of two of the sheriff's deputies, armed to the teeth.

"This is the man," said the sheriff, pointing to Cherokee.

The Governor advanced a step toward the prisoner and looked searchingly into his face.

Cherokee, seated upon the side of his bunk, bore the scrutiny unflinchingly.

"He looks like the man," the Governor remarked, "about the same height, as far as I can judge, but I may be mistaken. You are accused of being Captain Dick Talbot," he continued, addressing the prisoner. "What have you to say to the accusation?"

"Well, I'm almost a stranger in the town now, for I haven't been here for some time, but still I reckon that there's quite a number who will be able to remember and identify me."

"What is your name, sir?"

"Cherokee."

"Rather an odd appellation."

"Yes, it was given me a long time ago, when I used to wear my hair long down over my shoulders, and one of the boys remarked at the first mining camp I struck up in the north, hyer, that I looked like a Cherokee Indian, the moment I set foot in the town, and so, when my name was asked, I told them that their partner had 'handled' me right—you see, sir, I was short of a name just then—and so it happened I was called Cherokee."

"But you have another name?"

"Oh, yes, all men—Christian men—have two names, of course," the prisoner admitted.

"And what is your other name?"

"Well, John is a good name," the other replied, reflectively. "Yes, John is as good a name as I know of. S'pose you say John."

"John what?"

"Why, Cherokee, of course," the prisoner responded, a look of surprise upon his face. "John

"But, that is not your real name; you have another?"

"Maybe I have," answered Cherokee, in an extremely honest way.

"And what is it?"

"Well, your excellency, you are really too much for me; it is so long since I was called anything but Cherokee that I'll be hanged if I can exactly remember my other names."

"Let me assist your memory," said the Governor, grimly; "your other name is Richard Talbot."

"Not by a jugful!" cried the prisoner, "No Dick Talbot in mine, if you please."

"It is your right name!"

"No, it ain't!"

"You are the man!" cried the Governor, positively. "It is of no use for you to attempt to deny it. I recognize you, and I can swear to your identity before any court in California!"

"I'm too well brought up to contradict you, but you're barking up the wrong tree."

"Oh, you might as well own up, Talbot; you're cornered!" the big sheriff exclaimed.

"There is not the slightest doubt in my mind on the subject!" the State official exclaimed, positively. "I recognize both his voice and manner."

"Well, then, if there isn't any doubt about the thing the quicker we are off the better," the sheriff said.

Cherokee looked up in astonishment.

"The quicker we are off," he repeated; "what do you mean?"

"Why, that we are up to all your tricks, and we are going to try a little dodge on you that will make your pals stare when they find it out. You slipped through my fingers once, in this here town, and I don't intend that you shall repeat the operation."

Cherokee looked amazed, and the burly sheriff noting the look continued in triumph:

"Oh, I'm up to a thing or two as you will find out, and I reckon this time that your gang will have to get up a horse they lie down to get ahead of me. This hyer old saanty ain't the strongest jail in California, and I'm going to snake you right out of hyer and carry you down to Yreka, and from there to Sacramento, whar I reckon your pals won't be able to do much toward getting you out. Afore you're half an hour older we'll have you out of this town."

"Oh, it's a matter of perfect indifference to me," Cherokee remarked, as cool as a cucumber. "But I give you fair warning that you're t'ing a good deal of trouble for nothing, for when you come to clear the thing up you'll find that you've got the wrong pig by the ear."

"Keep it up! never say die!" remarked Dancer, admiringly.

"Handcuff him, and let him be thoroughly searched!" the Governor commanded.

Cherokee submitted without a murmur. His weapons had been previously removed, and now but little "plunder" rewarded the operators. Thirty odd dollars in money, a little pearl-handled pocket-knife, a pack of plain, white-backed cards, a little memorandum-book with pencil, and that was all.

"You take charge of the articles, sheriff," the Governor said.

"All right," replied Dancer, depositing the things in one of the capacious pockets of the heavy coat he wore. "The keards will come in handy, for it's a long ride from hyer to Yreka, and we kin have a friendly game going up, and mebbe you kin give me a few points that will come in handy some time, for they say that you're a lightning player," and he winked humorously at Cherokee.

"I'll endeavor to make myself agreeable," the prisoner replied.

The calmness of the man astonished the witnesses, for he did not seem to be at all put about by the unexpected journey.

The Governor had planned the affair with a great deal of skill. Intelligence of the capture of the man supposed to be Dick Talbot had been instantly carried to him, for he had not retired to his couch at the time that the affair had occurred, and he had determined upon acting promptly. He had dispatched a messenger in search of Brockford and the sheriff, and although the second was easily found, it was some time before the postmaster was got at, but when he finally arrived, the Governor held a long and secret consultation with him, and when it was ended Dancer was notified to have a coach prepared, so that, if the prisoner was identified, he could be taken out of the town at once, for, as the Governor justly remarked:

"If we have succeeded in getting Talbot within our clutches, unless we are extremely careful he will slip out of our fingers again, just as he did before."

Dancer was cautioned to use the utmost secrecy in regard to the coach.

"We mustn't let any one get wind of our design," the postmaster suggested, "for there's no telling but that some of Talbot's gang are right in the town, and we don't want him snaked out of our hands again. You see, if we can take him out of the town quietly, without any one knowing it, we'll have him half-way to Yreka before our little move is discovered."

The idea was a good one, and, as the reader has seen, they hastened at once to put it into execution.

The prisoner was carefully handcuffed, and then, escorted by the sheriff, was taken to the coach which stood before the door of the jail.

Cherokee cast a rapid glance around him as he walked through the darkness, but not a soul was in sight. The hour was well chosen to escape observation, and even Cherokee, although he knew that he had friends whose vigilance was usually untiring, yet in this case, if they were caught napping, they could hardly be blamed, for the move was an extremely good one, and one, too, not apt to be suspected.

As we have said, not a soul was in sight, and Brockford, who had in some unaccountable way taken a great dislike to the prisoner, and therefore kept a close watch upon him, noticed the searching look that Cherokee cast around him, and guessed what he was after.

"We've stolen a march on your pals, this time, Mister Talbot," he observed, "and I reckon that, in a great measure, you may thank me for it."

"I'm very much obliged to you for the information," the prisoner replied, halting with his foot on the coach-step and looking the postmaster full in the eye—"very much obliged, indeed, and I shall feel that I am your debtor until I get an opportunity to square the account."

It was a threat, boldly spoken, and the man meant it, that was plain.

"Oh, don't trouble yourself to waste your breath; we've got you safely caged this time; I'll come and see you hung; you've chosen to poke your nose into my affairs, and now you must pay the penalty," the other replied, coarsely.

"There's many a slip between the cup and the lip, and I'm not standing on the scaffold yet," Cherokee retorted, getting into the coach.

"Don't let him escape!" cautioned the Governor. "If by any chance there should be such a thing as an attempt at a rescue, put your revolver to his head and blow out his brains; I'll see you thr. up!"

"All right, Governor!" the sheriff cried, from the interior of the coach, closing the door as he spoke; "I'll do the thing up brown! You can just bet that I will hold him, alive or dead!"

"Start ahead!" exclaimed the politician. The whip cracked and away the coach went.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ON THE ROAD.

"Good-by to Captain Dick Talbot!" the Governor exclaimed, as he watched the coach disappear in the darkness.

"Yes, I flatter myself that at last we have succeeded in accomplishing the task that a good many men have attempted but failed in doing; we have laid the unquiet spirit that so long has haunted this town, and in the future Cinnabar will not be troubled by the visits of this red-handed avenger!" Brockford exclaimed, exultingly.

The Governor shivered, and the postmaster, whose quick eyes noted the movement, looked at him in astonishment.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Don't talk about red-handed avengers; you make me nervous," the other replied.

Brockford laughed.

"Oh, we've caged our bird this time, safe enough!"

"Yes, it would seem so, but remember we had him foul and fast before, yet he succeeded in slipping through our fingers."

"We have guarded against that now."

"Possibly; and yet there's a good deal of truth in the old saying that Talbot quoted."

"Many a slip between the cup and the lip, eh?"

"Exactly; suppose he should escape from this trap?"

"Well, if he should, it would most certainly be an ugly thing for both of us, for we have given him ample cause now to take a most terrible vengeance."

"Brockford," exclaimed the politician, abruptly, "I am not a timid man as men go, and I am as fond of my money as the average of mortals, yet this very moment I would be willing to plank down ten thousand dollars in hard cash if I could see this iron-willed, red-handed desperado cold and rigid in death stretched out before me."

Again Brockford laughed.

"Oh, you hold him altogether too high, Governor! Alive or dead, he's not worth any such sum as that."

"I should be willing to give it to be relieved of this dreadful feeling of apprehension that I constantly feel."

"By this time to-morrow night you will, in all probability, be at ease," the postmaster remarked, significantly.

"I hope so," cried the politician, fervently. "From the very bottom of my soul I hope so."

"And if things turn out as we think they will—and in my mind there is not the slightest doubt in regard to the subject—will you go in the Cinnabar mine speculation?"

"Oh, I think so, although Talbot protested that the mine was played out, and at that time

he seemed to be honest in his opinion. It will only take a few hundred dollars to try it, anyway."

"And in my opinion it is worth the risk."

"Yes, yes, but not until we hear the last of Talbot!" exclaimed the official, nervously. "Which way are you going?"

"I'll walk as far as the hotel with you."

At the Occidental Brockford bid the politician good-night.

The Governor retired at once to rest, while the postmaster marched off in the darkness, for he had much more work on hand—work which must be attended to before the first gray streaks of morning light lined the eastern skies.

But, for the present, we will refrain from following up the footsteps of the darkest and about the most dangerous plotter that the Shasta valley had ever known, and take up again the fortunes of the man accused of being Injun Dick Talbot.

The details of the scheme to remove the suspected man forever from the town of Cinnabar had all been carefully attended to, for Brockford, who had arranged the matter, was determined that the prisoner should not escape this time. Red Mickey, reputed to be the best driver in the valley, handled the ribbons; no Pacific slope graduate was he, but on the contrary he had learned the art of holding the ribbons on the stage-coach routes that still exist in the upper part of New York State. The team that drew the coach, a pair of blood bays, were the best that the express line could boast. Mickey, too, was heavily armed, despite his protest, for as he energetically cried:

"Wid two sich hard-mouthed divils as them bays to hould, phat's the use of loadin' me down wid weapons that would do fir a regiment?"

But Mickey was forced to arm, nevertheless.

By the driver's side sat the sheriff's best man, "Boss" Thomson, a ponderous six-footer, popularly reported to be able to whip his weight in wild-cats. He, too, was armed to the teeth, and in order to be prepared for any forcible attempt at a rescue, he carried his reach-loading rifle on his lap, for use at the slightest sign of danger.

Within the coach sat the sheriff and Cherokee.

The prisoner was closely handcuffed, and for further security the sheriff had tied a lariat around the prisoner's legs, then passed it up around his waist, and then took a turn or two of it around his own portly person. As he explained:

"I mought take a notion to take forty winks, you know, 'tween now and break o' day, and I should feel hurt ef I happened to wake up in the morning and discover that you had taken French leave without the formality of stopping to bid me good-by."

Cherokee smiled; he appreciated a joke even at his own expense.

"Well, sheriff," he remarked, after the binding operation was completed, "from the way you have fixed things I reckon I won't go far without your knowledge."

"That's my little game!" Dancer responded, with a grin, which stretched his enormous mouth almost from ear to ear. "I tell you what it is, old man, you're in an awful bad fix; they have gone for you this time with forty horse-power! Did you hear what the last orders to me were?"

"Something about shooting me if a rescue was attempted."

"Yes, sir!"

"Yes, I heard that; and, by the way, if I am Richard Talbot, as is charged, and my pals should attempt a rescue on the road—"

"Oh, but they won't!" cried the sheriff, interrupting the speaker; "it ain't possible, you know."

"Why not?"

"How in thunder are they going to get wind of this hyer trip?" Dancer demanded, with air of triumph. "Oh, no, it clearly ain't possible. It was a mighty smart trick. Your pal-jest about this time are thinking you are safe in the jail, and, maybe, are hatching up plans to pull you out, never thinking, you know, that you are on the road to Yreka." And Dancer chuckled loudly as he finished the speech.

"If I am Dick Talbot," the prisoner repeated, "you can just bet about all that you have in this world, sheriff, that my pals are in the habit of keeping their eyes open, and that already they know where I am as well as you do."

The big under jaw of Dancer dropped in amazement, and he stared, round-eyed, at the cool speaker.

The moon afforded ample light, so that each could distinguish the features of the other.

"Oh, it's a sure enough fact, my bold official!" Cherokee continued. "Dick Talbot's friends work as well in the darkness as in the light; and, as I said before, if I am Injun Dick, the chances are just about a hundred to one that before the world is three hours older this coach will be stopped and you will be called upon to deliver up your prize."

"I'll give you up dead, not living!" the sheriff cried, with grim determination.

"That is exactly what I am coming to," the prisoner replied. "If a rescue is attempted, you are going to blow my brains out!"

"That's my platform!"

"And what mercy do you think you can expect after that feat is performed?"

The burly sheriff stared at the prisoner. This idea had never occurred to him.

"I tell you, sheriff, you'll be booked for a quick passage to the other world."

"Burn my skin!" of I don't believe that you're 'bout right," Dancer muttered. "I s'pose your pals would salivate me, for sure!"

"What else can you expect? An official life has its dangers as well as its pleasures, Mr. Dancer."

And just as the sheriff was about to open his mouth to reply, the coach came to a sudden stop.

In alarm Dancer clutched his pistols and poked his head out of the window.

The prisoner had reckoned shrewdly; masked and armed men blocked the way, and just as the sheriff comprehended the situation, a bold voice cried out, in the old, familiar Californian way:

"Throw up your hands, pards, or we'll 'plug' you!"

CHAPTER XXV.

MEN WHO WERE NOT EXPECTED.

THE ambuscade had been chosen with excellent judgment. The trail at this point traversed a small prairie, dotted here and there with clumps of timber, around and among which the road ran, and although, in addition to the driver, who, as we have stated, was fairly bristling with weapons, the best deputy the sheriff boasted sat on the box with a breech-loading rifle laid across his lap, his fingers on the trigger.

All due precaution seemed to be taken against a surprise, but what could mortal man do, even one as well versed in the customs of the mountain region as the sheriff's deputy, when from an innocent-looking clump of timber a horseman rode, and, not ten paces from the trail, "covered" the official with a cocked rifle, and at the same moment another masked man appeared on the right, one directly ahead and two in the rear.

Against such a force it was madness to offer resistance, and the sheriff fairly groaned when he realized how completely he was entrapped.

He sunk back in his seat and cursed his ill-luck.

The prisoner laughed as he watched the expression upon the face of the burly official.

"Well, sheriff, I reckon that I won't ride to Yreka with you," he said, quietly.

"Durn the luck!" the sheriff cried. "Again you've played best trumps."

"A chance for you to carry out the Governor's order now," Cherokee suggested.

"I reckon that my life is worth as much to me as anybody else's life, and I ain't anxious to cash my checks yet. The trick is yours, pardner, and I pass." And with the word he unfastened the lariat which bound him to the prisoner. "Oh, no! ef I was to go for you I reckon that your gang would go for me, and so, no sugar in mine, thank you."

"A sensible conclusion!" Cherokee exclaimed.

"Well, take care of yourself," and the prisoner moved to rise, but a sudden thought checked him. "By the by, just have the kindness to unlock these playthings, will you?" and he held up his wrists encircled by the steel bracelets as he spoke.

"Of course; anything to oblige," replied Dancer, with a grimace, and at once he produced the key and unlocked the handcuffs.

"And now my weapons, please. I'm sorry that I can't stay longer, but I cannot be always with you, you know."

With another wry face the sheriff presented Cherokee with the elegant tools which had so often stood him in good need.

"Ta, tal Take care of yourself. See you again some time; and, sheriff, I won't be hard on you for your share in this night's work, for you have only done your duty, but for the others—well, when you get back to Cinnabar, just give my compliments to both the postmaster and the Governor, and tell them that I owe them one, and that they may rest easy that I shall settle the obligation, for no man in the Shasta ever knew Cherokee to crawfish out of payin' his debts, whether the quittance was due in either coin or blood."

The quiet, determined tone fairly made the burly sheriff shiver, and mentally he thanked his lucky stars that he did not stand in the shoes of either Brockford or the Governor.

"So long!" ejaculated Cherokee, thrusting his weapons into their pockets, opening the door of the coach, and jumping out onto the moonlit ground.

"Drive on!" cried a hoarse voice, the leader of the masked men speaking; and the command was at once obeyed.

On went the coach at its best speed, the driver applying the lash to the restive animals, and Cherokee, alarmed by the strange voice, glancing around him, with hand on weapons, discovered that he was in the hands of the Black-hoods!

No pals of Injun Dick had come to his rescue, but, on the contrary, the band of strangely-disguised men who had made a powerful name for themselves by wild and lawless deeds amid the hills of Shasta.

The coach went on a hundred yards or more, and then making a circle to the right, wheeled around and took the back trail toward Cinnabar.

For once in his life, at any rate, if never before, the bold Cherokee had been taken entirely by surprise. He had been sure when the coach had been stopped that it was through the kindly devices of ardent friends, but when he looked around him and saw that he was surrounded by the road-agent gang, the Black-hoods of Shasta, he began to ask himself if he hadn't jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire.

The coach had disappeared in the distance, and the road-agents, still with leveled weapons in their hands, began to close in upon him.

If the strangers were friends they came in a very unfriendly fashion, and Cherokee, always a firm believer in the idea that the best way to meet danger was with a bold front, pulled out his revolvers and prepared to stand upon the defensive.

The highwaymen at once perceived the design, and their leader called out:

"You fool! do you think that you can fight us?"

"I reckon that I can try," Cherokee replied, decisively.

"We are five to one! If you are wise, you will throw down your weapons and surrender."

"Not by a jugful," was the answer. "I don't know what you want with me, but I'm going to find out before I allow you to come any nearer. You're all within range now, and I give you fair warning that I shall plug some of you if you advance."

"We are friends."

"Prove it by putting up your weapons."

"Haven't we proved it by rescuing you from the sheriff?"

Cherokee pricked up his ears at this question. How did they know who was in the coach?

"Why did you interfere in this matter? What is your little game?" he demanded.

"Well, we want just such a man as you."

"Oh, you do?"

"Yes; and since you have fallen out with the law, why, you had better fall in with us."

Cherokee had had an idea, when he first heard the voice of the speaker, that the man was no stranger to him, for his ears were wonderfully correct in this way, and the more he heard of the voice the more certain he became that his suspicion was not without foundation.

"I'm very much obliged to you for your offer, but I'm the poorest man in the world to work in company. When I am not all for myself, I am not really worth anything."

"Oh, you wrong yourself, I am sure, and we are quite willing to run the risk," the outlaw replied. "Come, say that you will join us, and you shall have a good position in the band. Remember that we have just saved you from the hangman's rope."

"Ah! I'm not so sure of that," Cherokee replied, quickly. "There's many a slip between the cup and the lip, and to my thinking the chances are ten to one that I would have slipped through the hands of the sheriff between Yreka and Sacramento—that is, supposing that my worthy friend the sheriff had ever succeeded in getting me to Yreka, and I have serious doubts in regard to that."

"Mebbe you could have fooled the sheriff, but you can't fool us," the outlaw retorted. "We know all about you, Mister Dick Talbot; we know how you offered to buy your pardon from the Governor by hunting us down, and now that we have got you foul we intend that you shall either join our band or else we'll put you where you won't trouble anybody any more, in this world."

Although outnumbered five to one, and the road-agents were armed with rifles as well as with revolvers, Cherokee was about to bid them to mortal combat, when he fell the victim of a wily trick.

The moment Cherokee had sprung from the coach, one of the outlaws in the rear had slipped off his horse and sneaked into one of the little clumps of timber, and then, during the conversation, had taken advantage of the cover afforded by the bushes to approach quite close to the spot where Cherokee stood, and at the critical moment, when a bloody fight seemed close at hand, with a dextrous cast of a lasso, with which he was armed, and which he used with all the skill and adroitness of a herdsman of the Lower Californian plains where the long-horned steers roam, he ensnared the desperate Cherokee.

The prisoner had not expected any such attack as this, and had not been on the watch to guard against it, and so fell an easy prey.

The road-agents closed in at once upon him, jumping in hot haste from their horses. They bound him and took away his weapons; Cherokee made no resistance when once fairly in their hands, for he realized that it would be fruitless; fortune seemed to frown upon him now.

"Well," cried the road-agent who had previously carried on the conversation, "I reckon that you ain't a-going to have much choice about this matter, now; it is to be as we say."

"No; I might as well die now as to go on for a week or two and then be strung up like a dog by a rope."

"You ain't half so smart as you think you are!" the outlaw exclaimed. "We have been

playing roots on you, old man. We don't want you to join us; it was our little game to get you into our hands, for we've got the same arrangement with the Governor that you tried to make. You didn't make the rifle, but we did. Your death secures our pardon, so I reckon that we won't be in any danger of wearing a hempn neck-tie yet awhile, and how is that for light?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

CIRCUMSTANCES ALTER.

"THE fact is, young man, we've stole your trick and the game is ours!" exclaimed another one of the road-agents, in tones only too well known to the prisoner, and when he had finished the speech the man removed the black hood which he wore and revealed the strongly-marked features of Brockford, the postmaster.

Cherokee realized at once that he was in a position of great danger. He understood now who the men were, with the patches of cow-plaster on their faces, who had taken up the postmaster's quarrel with the Bella Union girl. "You were going to hunt the Black-hoods but they have saved you the trouble by hunting you," Brockford continued, grimly, "and your death procures us our pardon; and now, since we want to be easy with you, we'll give you the choice of how to die—what means do you prefer?"

"I might answer like the Irishman in story that I would prefer to be hanged on a gooseberry bush, and being in no hurry for my time to come would wait until it grew, but I don't suppose that you would appreciate the joke."

"Three means of death are open to you," Brockford replied, sternly, by no means relishing the levity of the other. "Steel, lead or rope; which do you prefer?"

"Oh, I'm not at all particular; go ahead, and fix it any way you like."

"Rig a lariat from a tree branch, yonder," Brockford commanded, "I never saw a man hanged in all my life, and I've quite a curiosity to see the sight." The postmaster was striving to imitate the coolness of the prisoner.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea, and it will give you some little inkling of how you will be apt to feel when you are swung off," Cherokee retorted.

"The rope is not spun that will hang me!" Brockford cried.

"Oh, yes, it is, and made and exposed for sale in some store in Cinnabar, and when Judge Lynch rises, one of these days, and the angry miners with arms in their hands hunt you out of your holes in the mountains, you won't be given any choice of death but will be strung up to the first tree handy as a warning to other cutthroats; you'll die with your boots on, and I'll bet a hundred dollars on it!"

These idle words irritated Brockford terribly, and he at once hurried up the preparation for the "hanging match."

A lariat was passed over a projecting tree-branch, a running noose made in one end, and Cherokee being placed under the tree the loop was adjusted about his neck.

"Mighty low down branch for a hanging scrape," one of the road-agents suggested.

"It's high enough," Brockford declared; "just so long as his toes don't touch the ground, it will work. Now, then, Mr. Cherokee, Injun Dick, Captain Talbot, or whatever else you may be pleased to call yourself, I'll give you just five minutes by the watch to say your prayers," and as he spoke the postmaster took out his timepiece.

It was an impressive picture, and one hardly to be witnessed in any other land.

The moonlight was beginning to fade away and the faint light of the coming dawn was apparent in the eastern skies.

Cherokee stood under the tree, the rope around his neck; two of the road-agents at the other end of the rope had attached it to the horn of the Mexican saddle of one of their horses and stood at the head of the animal, prepared to lead it away, and by the action to launch the prisoner into the other world at the signal of the chief of the gang.

Death indeed did seem to be fearfully near, and yet Cherokee stood beneath the tree, as clear eyed and as calm of face as though he had not even the interest of a spectator in the scene.

Brockford closed his watch with a sharp snap.

"The five minutes are up!" he exclaimed; "drive on your mule team!"

"Get up!" cried one of the road-agents, smacking the haunch of the animal with his hand.

The horse bent itself to the somewhat unaccustomed strain, but hardly had the rope tightened around Talbot's neck when the sharp crack of a rifle sounded on the still morning air, and with a twang the lariat parted, and then with a loud shout some dark forms sprung out from the concealment of one of the timber clumps and charged forward upon the road-agents, and these worthies, always more ready to run than fight, took to their heels on the instant.

Nimble they scampered to their horses, vaulted upon their backs and fled at the top of their speed, never stopping to look behind them or to take count of the number of the foe.

Brockford had run as swiftly—and as soon as

any of his men, for more than any of the rest he dreaded recognition.

The five road-agents had been put to flight by two men, Bowers, the irrepressible vagabond, and the Indian, Mud-turtle, Cherokee's steadfast friends.

As Cherokee had informed the sheriff, his friends watched as well by night as by day, for from the moment that Cherokee had entered the jail, the Indian had never taken his eyes off of it, and therefore as soon as the sheriff departed in the coach with his prisoner, Cherokee's two faithful followers procured their horses and at once set out in pursuit.

Following close behind the coach, awaiting a favorable opportunity to attempt a rescue, they were alarmed by the approach of Brockford and his gang, and, concealing themselves by the roadside, allowed the others to pass. They suspected that an assault on the prisoner was intended, for Bowers had a shrewd suspicion that Brockford was in some way connected either with them or with some other band of outlaws; he had formed a bad opinion of the postmaster.

And so, being fully warned, the pair had witnessed the Black-hoods wrest the sheriff's prisoner from him, and had then taken advantage of a favorable chance to advance to Cherokee's rescue.

The sudden parting of the lariat, severed by the ball from the Indian's rifle, had dropped Cherokee all in a heap to the ground, and by the time he had got upon his feet again, the road-agents were in full flight, and his friends in full possession of the field.

Mud-turtle hastened to cut the lariat that bound Cherokee's hands, while Bowers, as was his wont, commenced to brag of the feat which had been performed.

"I tell you, my noble dook! that war a mighty hefty trick!" he exclaimed. "Never in all time did I see pilgrims like these hyer git up and dust quicker!"

And then, in answer to Cherokee's question, Bowers explained how it happened that they had come so aptly to his rescue, and he in turn was astonished when informed by Cherokee that Brockford was the chief of the Black-hoods.

"And henceforth," continued Cherokee, "it will be our task to hunt these Black-hoods down. Mud-turtle, you must keep a watch upon the postmaster, and track him to the secret haunt of the Black-hoods among the hills. Brockford of course, will return to the town and pursue his business as usual, although he knows I am aware that he is one of the road-agent gang, but he will rely upon the fact that so long as this accusation is hanging over me, I shall not be able to show my face in Cinnabar; but if I can't go there as Cherokee, I can as some one else, and I reckon that I can assume a disguise that will baffle the eyes even of my bitterest foe, for in the town I must be. I've got a plan in my head in regard to the Governor I intend to work before I am a month older. I'm going to try some of his own tricks on himself."

"Big thing!" cried Bowers. The Indian merely nodded assent; Mud-turtle was always sparing of words.

"If the Governor was any common man, after the way in which he has treated me, it would be either his life or mine. If he refused to give me satisfaction by a fair fight, I'd cowhide him in presence of the whole town, but, as he is the Governor of the State, and has the pardoning power in his hands, I mean to pursue a different tack with him. I want my pardon for all offenses done in the past, and I mean to have it. Now, my idea is this: I'm going to kidnap his excellency, carry him off to the mountains, and keep him there until he agrees to what I want."

"But he may back out of it under the plea that you used compulsion, when he is set at liberty," suggested Bowers.

"I have thought of that: but first I shall hunt down and destroy this Black-hood band, and when that is accomplished, the Governor will see that I am decidedly in earnest and that he will not be acting wisely if he attempts to either trifle or brave me. And then, too, the destruction of the road-agents will afford him a fair excuse for his action in pardoning me, for of course he must be able to give some reason to the public for the act, since the people at large haven't the best opinion in the world of me; and yet, Heaven knows nearly every one of my violent deeds, which has offended the majesty of the law, has been forced upon me by circumstances utterly beyond my control. There seems to be an evil genius who takes delight in pursuing me, and each and every time that I get fairly settled down to a quiet life, some untoward event brings me into some violent contest, despite my efforts to avoid trouble."

"You'll find peace, some time," Bowers remarked, consolingly.

"Yes, in the grave; nowhere else, I fear," Cherokee replied; "but come; we must get back to Cinnabar, for I've got to change into somebody else before morning."

In three minutes they were on the road.

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN CONSULTATION.

AT the termination of his interview with the masked man, the sheriff had retraced his

steps to Cinnabar, and upon arriving there early in the morning had proceeded to acquaint the Governor with all the particulars of his unexpected encounter with the outlaws in the wilderness.

Of course his excellency expressed the greatest surprise, and reproved the sheriff for allowing the prisoner to be taken out of his hands so easily, but the bluff Mr. Dancer, in indignation, wanted to know, "what in thunder" he could do?

"You see, they had me foul!" he explained. "They were all around me; it was as neat a job as you ever see'd. In course I could have plugged my man and settled his hash to one't, but then, it war jest a million of dollars to a cent that the cusses would have strung me up to the first tree without giving me any time to scare up a prayer or two, or else have riddled me as full of holes as a sieve; and though I am sheriff, I really reckon that I ain't called upon to throw my life away in any sich manner."

"Well, well, I suppose that it could not be avoided, and that you did all you could," the official replied; "and since the mischief is done, and the fellow is at large again, why, all we can do is to put forth a strong effort to recapture him."

"Oh, I'll lay him by the heels ag'in; you kin bet all that you are worth on that, Governor!" Dancer exclaimed, confidently, and then he withdrew to make preparation to accomplish that rather difficult task.

The moment that he was alone the anxious expression which had appeared upon the face of the politician on receiving the news of the escape, disappeared; he chuckled and rubbed his hands, gleefully.

"Ah!" he cried; "it's good-by to Mister Dick Talbot, then! Brockford was quite right; it was much the easiest way to get rid of the scoundrel. The law's delays are proverbial, and a shrewd rascal, if he has money enough to pay the lawyers, can generally find some loophole through which to escape."

And with a mind relieved of care he called for his breakfast, and when the meal arrived sat down prepared to enjoy it. Talbot's death sharpened his appetite.

He was in the full enjoyment of the repast when Brockford arrived.

The Governor greeted him cordially, and at once guessed, from the peculiar expression upon his face, that he, too, had received the news of the fate of the King of the Road.

"Sit down, old fellow!" he exclaimed; "make yourself at home, and we'll talk over this Cinnabar mine matter; the road is open to us, now."

"Not much," the postmaster retorted, curtly.

"How so? what do you mean?" asked the politician, in astonishment.

"Why, the little game I planned hasn't worked, that's all."

"I don't understand! Dancer was here not half an hour ago, and reported that the prisoner had been taken out of his hands by a party of masked men—the Black-hoods."

"That's true enough: the Black-hoods did get hold of him, all right, but the trouble was, they did not finish him on the spot, and they, in turn, were surprised by Talbot's friends."

The Governor fairly leaped to his feet in alarm.

"Is it possible!" he cried; "then the fellow is at liberty, again?"

"Yes, sir, that is about the size of it," Brockford responded, gloomily.

"Oh, but this is terrible!" the official exclaimed, nervously. "Why, my life is not safe, now, for a single moment. I am liable to be attacked at any time."

"Yes, that is true enough."

"Then the quicker I get out of here, the better."

"Yes, but you had better look sharp that you don't jump out of the frying-pan into the fire, for Talbot, smarting under this last attempt, will be pretty apt to try to get square now, at any cost."

"Very true—very true," the Governor observed, thoughtfully; "this is an ugly bit of business."

"As far as I am concerned, I think I shall make myself scarce for a little while, until I see how things are going to work. If I were in your place, I should increase the reward for Talbot to about five thousand dollars; such a sum as that would be an inducement to some desperate fellow to undertake the job of capturing him. Make the offer for him, alive or dead. It won't do any hurt, and may do some good."

"I will at once!" the official exclaimed, decidedly.

"And if you will take my advice you will go armed to the teeth hereafter, prepared to defend your life at a moment's notice, for there is no telling when an attack may come now."

The politician turned quite pale, for he was anything but a brave man.

"Do you—do you think that it will be as bad as that?" he asked, a tremor in his voice.

"Indeed I do. Talbot is a desperate man, and this last affair will make him wild for revenge. He is used to assuming all sorts of disguises and the chances are just about a hundred

to one that he will be in town to-night, ripe for mischief."

"I must take measures to protect myself then, I suppose," the other remarked, ruefully.

"Yes; it is as well to be on your guard. As I said before, I shall probably get out, for a short time. I have some business up in the mountains that I ought to look after, and I reckon I can't select a much better time than the present, as things are."

At this point the interview was interrupted by the appearance of one of the legal lights of the town, a shrewd, sharp little lawyer, Jefferson Vanderhoof by name.

This gentleman announced that he had been retained by Mr. Daily, and that he thought proper to see the Governor in person in regard to the matter, before taking legal steps to release the prisoner from durance vile.

"You see, sir," the lawyer explained, "as I and Mr. Daily understand the matter, you are holding him on mere suspicion, and I assume that you will be quite willing to release him at once, the moment you are satisfied that the accusation against him is unfounded."

"Certainly," responded the Governor at once, while Brockford bit his heavy under-lip and cursed in his heart the cupidity of the jailer who had evidently been bribed by the prisoner, for strict orders had been given, that Daily should not be allowed to hold any communication at all with the outer world.

"I told Mr. Daily that I would see you at once in regard to the matter, and I assured him that I had every confidence that the matter could be arranged without any trouble."

"You know that the prisoner is accused of being one of Dick Talbot's gang?" Brockford remarked.

"Yes; but he assures me that the idea is utterly ridiculous."

"The charge has been made, though."

"Oh, yes; of course I understand that, but my client claims that it is a question of mistaken identity."

"You have heard, I presume, that Talbot is again at liberty?"

"Yes; the sheriff gave me an account of the affair."

"And of course, under the circumstances, we can't be too careful in regard to any one charged with being a member of his band. We have a witness who swears most distinctly and directly that Daily has been one of the head men of this road-agent gang, and so, of course, we considered ourselves perfectly justified in holding him."

"Well, your excellency, notwithstanding this witness that Mr. Brockford speaks of," the lawyer observed, addressing his conversation directly to the Governor, "I am quite positive that there is some mistake about the matter, and that, when brought face to face with my client, this witness will not press the charge, and therefore I respectfully ask that an examination may be held as soon as possible."

The Governor looked at Brockford.

"What do you say?" he asked.

"The witness upon whom I rely to prove the charge, left the town this morning and will not return until late this evening," the postmaster replied, "but we can have the thing put through the first thing in the morning."

"All right; if that is the best thing that you can do."

"Well, I don't see any other way in which we can arrange the matter, and if Mr. Daily is innocent of all knowledge of this desperado, there won't be any one in the world more sorry than I that he has been put to any trouble," the postmaster remarked, with an appearance of great honesty.

"It is possible that the witness has made a mistake, you know," the Governor observed.

"Or that he has been bribed to make this absurd accusation by some enemy of Mr. Daily who has some personal end to serve," the lawyer said, dryly, and although he never even glanced at Brockford, yet the postmaster understood that the shot was aimed at him.

He comprehended instantly that the old man had not concealed anything from his legal adviser.

"To-morrow will tell the story," Brockford remarked, "and if we can't hold Mr. Daily, why then, of course, we shall have to let Mr. Daily go." And he smiled and showed his teeth as he spoke, in a way that convinced the lawyer that he meant mischief, but, of course, at present nothing more could be done, and the limb of the law withdrew.

"This Daily business is some little side game of yours, isn't it?" the politician asked.

"Yes; and I reckon no lawyer in this town holds a hand that can beat it, either, as this smart fellow will find out before he is a day older," Brockford replied; and then he too departed.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE POSTMASTER TRUMPS A TRICK.

AFTER the interview with the Governor the lawyer had proceeded at once to the jail and reported progress.

Old Daily listened attentively, but he was not so favorably impressed as the lawyer.

"To-morrow morning, then, this witness is to appear?" he asked.

"Yes, but don't let that worry you, at all, for I'll engage to make mince-meat out of him!" the lawyer assured. "Of course I assume that you have dealt frankly with me, in this matter, and that your statement that you have no relation, whatever, with this Captain Dick Talbot is strictly true."

"Yes, sir, it is true. I never attempt to deceive my legal adviser. If I was mixed up with this outlaw, I should tell you so, at once."

"A sensible course, most certainly. A lawyer, like a priest, should always receive a full confession, otherwise he is pretty sure to be hampered at some critical moment. If I understood you correctly, Brockford is no friend of yours, and has instigated this charge for the purpose of getting you under his thumb."

"Exactly; he had the impudence to come and tell me so, and to threaten that he would make it warm for me if I didn't agree to his demands."

"Have you any idea who this witness is, who is to appear against you?"

"Not the least."

"Some fellow, I suppose, who would be willing to swear to anything, provided he was paid well enough."

"Very likely. Why, to give you an idea how utterly innocent I am of being the man they claim me to be, I never even heard of Dick Talbot until the other day, when the news of his fight with the Governor was made public. You see, I have only been living for a little while up in this region; in fact, I am really a new-comer on this coast, anyway."

"I'll have you out of this in the morning!" the lawyer then assured his client, confidently.

Old Daily shook his head.

"You doubt that, eh?"

"Well, I hope that everything will be all right, but really, I am afraid that in the interim Brockford will be up to some trick."

"Oh, I don't think there is the slightest danger of that. Brockford is shrewd enough, and utterly unscrupulous, no doubt, and wouldn't hesitate at any trick to gain the end he sought, but in this case he can't do anything, and he is not fool enough to try any game in which he is sure to be beaten. He had an idea that if he once got you locked up here, you would come to terms with him, but now he sees that you intend to fight him, you just take my word for it, he will gracefully take the back-track and get out as well as he can."

"Maybe so," but the old man looked the doubt which he felt as he uttered the words.

"I'll have you out in the morning, don't you fear!" and with this cheerful reassurance, the lawyer departed.

But Daily was not at all easy in his mind, notwithstanding the comforting assurance.

"He don't know Brockford as I know him," the old gentleman muttered, as he stretched himself upon the little cot-bed with which the cell was provided. "He has made up his mind to get Cassy, and he will be apt to take a great deal of trouble before he gives up his purpose. If the lawyer has got him, on the legal points, he'll be pretty certain to try some desperate underhand game, for I don't believe he will be willing to give up beaten."

And with these ideas in his mind, the prisoner passed anything but a pleasant day, although he was greatly cheered up by a visit from his daughter in the afternoon.

Cassandra, like the legal light, held to the opinion that Brockford, defeated in his plan, would retreat as gracefully as possible, and Daily, anxious of course to believe that in the end all would come right, concluded that his daughter and the lawyer were correct.

Daily retired early that night, and slept the sleep of the just until the "witching hour of midnight," and then he was suddenly aroused from his slumbers by the abrupt entrance into his cell of quite a number of men, one of whom bore a candle in his hand, and by its light the awakened prisoner was enabled to see that the faces of the strangers were masked with crape.

These disguised men had gained entrance to the jail in an extremely adroit manner.

The jailer's apartment was only a step or two from the main entrance to the jail, and on this occasion the guardian of the prison had been roused from his slumber by the sound of cautious knocking at the outer portal.

Hastily donning his garments, he hurried to the door.

"What is it?" he questioned.

"I want to see Daily," answered a voice which was strange to his ear.

"It can't be him!" growled the keeper, in anger. "This is a pretty time of night to come cavorting round this hyer jail! Go 'way; you're crazy!"

"I've got a message from his daughter—mighty important!"

"I reckon that it will keep until to-morrow," returned the officer of the keys.

"She give me ten dollars to give to you, so that you would kinder look arter the old man."

The custodian of the lock-up instantly pricked up his ears at this.

"How much did you say?"

"Ten dollars!"

"And that's ten good reasons why you should come in," replied the jailer, and he at once unlocked, unbolted and opened the door.

With a huge grin upon his coarse features he prepared to welcome his visitor, and pocket the money; the candle burning in the lantern in the entry afforded light; but a surprise was in store for the easily-bribed guardian which utterly astounded him.

The moment he got the door fairly open, a man stepped promptly in—a stranger—and clapped a revolver to the head of the jailer.

"Throw up your hands and don't move, or you're a dead man!" the assailant cried.

And in the rear of the stranger came four men armed to the teeth, and with their faces concealed by black crape.

"We're Judge Lynch's men!" cried the first one of the gang. "The vigilantes are up, and we are a-going to run this old fraud of a Daily out of town."

"All right, gentlemen; it is your say-so," replied the jailer, who hadn't the slightest idea of attempting to resist these well-armed and apparently desperate and determined men.

Therefore, without making the slightest attempt to expostulate with the strangers, the jailer conducted them to the cell occupied by Daily.

"Hyar's some friends come after you," he announced to the prisoner, as he flung open the door.

The old man took a look at the masked men, in doubt as to whether they were friends or enemies, but as he was well aware that it was of no use to remonstrate, whichever they were, he at once made his scanty toilet and announced that he was ready to accompany them.

They departed from the jail at once; horses were in waiting without; they mounted and rode off, and the jailer, as he ducked his head in reply to their parting salutation, mentally concluded that the vigilantes dodge was just a cute idea on the part of the prisoner's friends to procure his release.

The horsemen rode at an ordinary rate of speed through the sleeping town, but when they were once fairly out of the place they put spurs to their horses and pushed on at a good brisk jog.

Up along the river they went, toward where the great peak of Shasta shone silver in the moonlight; no word was spoken; along they went in silence, like so many grim phantoms.

They turned aside from the river and plunged into the jungle-like thicket; but they were not the only night-birds on the wing, for three men coming down the trail on foot were scared by the sound of horses' hoofs into the thicket, where they lay concealed until the horsemen passed; and when they were fairly out of sight, out into the trail came the three—the Indian, Mud-turtle, the irrepressible Joe Bowers and the mighty man of Shasta, Dick Talbot.

"Fortune plays into our hands, boys!" cried Injun Dick, in glee, "for, if I mistake not, yon horsemen are the Black-hoods, and now we have a fair chance to hunt them to their holes. Up and follow on the trail, Mud-turtle, till you track them home!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

ANOTHER SCHEME.

GREAT was the astonishment of the good folks of Cinnabar when they learned of the forcing of the jail and the carrying off of the old man.

The jailer told a good straight story, protested that he made a valiant resistance and yielded only to superior force, but the majority of the people doubted his tale, and the most of them believed that he had been bribed to allow the prisoner to escape.

His story of the rising of the Vigilantes found very few believers, for it seemed very strange indeed that, if "Judge Lynch" had taken action, no one in the town knew anything about it.

In fine, it was the common belief, even among those who yielded credence to the jailer's story, that Daily had been rescued by his friends, and those who put faith in the jailer's account of the occurrence, looked upon the Judge Lynch business as a clever device to avert suspicion.

Early in the morning the jailer had sought the sheriff and related to him his story.

Dancer had listened attentively but had instantly declared his disbelief in the Judge Lynch statement—in fact, openly charged the jailer with being a party to the escape of the prisoner, but the burly custodian of the jail had indignantly denied the impeachment, and as the reader knows with truth.

"No, sir-ee!" he had declared, "no such thing, hoss-fy! That ain't the kind of man I am! I should jest have liked to have had any two-legged pilgrim try any sich thing on me! Why, I would have whaled him on the spot!"

Although the sheriff did not put the least faith in this story, yet, as the mischief was done, he thought that there wasn't much use of making any trouble about the matter. Daily wasn't of any consequence, anyway; in fact, Dancer had been rather puzzled at Brockford's persistency in effecting his arrest, but he had not said anything about the matter, as he thought the postmaster to be a long-headed gen-

tleman, and supposed that he had good reasons for acting as he did.

So, the first thing that the sheriff did after receiving the news of Daily's unceremonious departure was to hunt up the postmaster to impart the news to him.

His quest was a failure, though, for no Brookford did he find.

The deputy, whom Brockford had left in charge of the post-office and the express business, said in reply to the sheriff's questions that Brockford had gone up in the mountains on mining business and left word that he might be back in a day or two, or that he might be detained for a week or more.

Under these circumstances Dancer thought that he had better see the Governor in regard to the matter, so he proceeded at once to the Occidental.

The sheriff found the politician remarkably nervous. As he explained:

"This infernal Dick Talbot business has unhinged all my nerves. It is not agreeable, you know—the thought that any moment this bold rascal may call me to a personal reckoning."

"Well, Governor, I'll allow that it is linder ugly," the sheriff admitted.

"In fact it has come to my knowledge that the bloods of the town are offering bets as to whether I will be able to get out of the town or not."

The sheriff stared.

"Oh, it's a fact!" the politician asserted. "I was sitting by the open window not ten minutes ago and overheard a conversation between a couple of sports. 'I'll go you an even bet that he don't get out of the valley alive,' said one. 'Make it the town and I'll take you!' replied the other. 'Oh, no, I want odds if you let that way,' said the first man. 'It ain't likely, you know, that he will go for him right in the town; he'll be apt to salivate him on the road to Yreka.'"

"Sho! you don't say so!" Dancer exclaimed, amazed.

"It is a fact, sir!" the politician protested, emphatically. "Of course there was nothing to connect me with the bet, in any way, in what I had heard, but in some mysterious manner it instantly flashed upon me that I was the person referred to, and that it was my life or death they were betting on, and so I listened attentively. 'Well, in my opinion,' said the second man, 'he'll be mighty apt to go for him right hyer in the town, for that's the kind of man he is; the more foolhardy the job the better it will suit him. I ain't a-giving odds in this hyer matter, but I will go you ten to ten that Talbot will make a vacancy in the governorship afore either of us is a week older.'"

"Oh, well, your excellency, that was all idle talk, you know," the sheriff remarked, anxious to relieve the Governor's mind of the weight of anxiety that was brooding so heavily upon it.

"It may be idle talk, but it ain't at all agreeable!" the politician retorted. "I'm not a nervous man, and I reckon that I don't lack back-bone, but the idea that this cool, blood-thirsty scoundrel is lurking somewhere around me, ready at the first favorable opportunity to blow out my brains with a shot-gun—"

"Oh, no! he never uses a shot-gun! A rifle or a pistol is his weapon."

"Well, the weapon doesn't signify; it is quite enough that he is looking for a chance to 'salivate' me, to use the expression that they seem to be fond of up in this region. Why, sir, the idea is perfectly awful; there is no doubt whatever in my mind that I stand a chance of being murdered in cold blood any time I may venture to show my nose out of doors, or, for that matter, I don't suppose I am much safer even in this house. Why, it would be the easiest matter in the world for him to knock at this door and fix me when I opened it, and the chances are, too, that he would get off, scot-free. From what I have seen of men and manners since I have been up in this region, I have come to the conclusion that there are not many men in this town who would attempt to stop Talbot in his passage through the street, even though they knew he was red-handed with my blood."

"Governor, I reckon you are about right thar," the sheriff observed, soberly. "This cuss don't hold his life worth a cent, anyway, and men ain't, as a general rule, anxious to invest in coffins, particularly when it ain't none of their funeral. The fact is, your excellency, public opinion is a leetle goin' ag'in' you, in this hyer Talbot matter. The town don't think you treated him jest right 'bout that there pardon; he made a pretty fair offer when he allowed that he would wipe the Black-hoods out provided you'd give him a clean bill of health, and the boys kinder think you 'double-banked' him when you went for him that time in the hotel hyer."

"That was all Brockford's fault!" the politician exclaimed, irritably. "If it had not been for his advice, I should never have taken the step I did, and I have been sorry about the affair ever since it happened. I'm not posted about men and things up here, you know, and of course I took Talbot to be a common sort of a desperado, and reckoned that, when we clapped him in jail, that would be the end of the mat-

ter. I hadn't the least idea I had engaged in a kind of vendetta, which could only end in the death of one or both of us."

"That's the kind of hair-pin he is, for sure!" Dancer observed, with a grin.

"It is all Brockford's fault!" the official persisted. "Had it not been for his counsel, I should never have become involved in the matter at all."

"He's dusted out o' town, you know."

"Yes, the infernal coward!" exclaimed the Governor, in a rage. "He pretends that he has business in the mountains, but I know better. He has simply got out of the way until this affair has blown over. He thinks probably that Talbot will finish me, and then, satisfied, will call it square with him. He has run away and left me to bear the brunt of the whole affair, and if I get out of this scrape alive I will be even with him. But now, sheriff, I want your advice in this matter, for you are better posted than I am about this region. I am sick of it. I want to get out. It is perfectly horrible to stay here and be murdered by this outlaw in cold blood! Can't you suggest any way out?"

"Well, yes, I reckon that I kin," Dancer replied, after a moment's thought. "If I was in your fix—if I was cooped up in this hyer town and wanted to quit the game and get out, with plenty of dust to back my hand, too—leeled as you are, too, Governor, on the money question—I would just get together five or six good men, fellers that wasn't afeard of their lives provided that they were well paid, and some day I would have them all in readiness, jest outside the town, and then I would get on my animal, jest as if I was a-going out for an airing, but would light out for Yreka as fast as my horse's legs could carry me."

"By Jove! that is a capital ideal!" cried the Governor, instantly.

"Well, it seems so to me," the sheriff replied, complacently. "It will be pretty sure to steal a march on your man. Talbot won't look for anything of that kind, you know, and mebbe you'd get to Yreka afore he discovers what is up. And if it does come to a skirmish in the mountains, why, you'll have your body-guard with you and you'll stand some show for your money."

"It is a fact; and now, Dancer, will you attend to the engaging of the men? I presume that it would be advisable not to let them know who or what I am, until I meet them on the road."

"I reckon that is best," the sheriff remarked, after thinking the matter over for a moment. "I kin put my finger on the very man to engineer the thing, too. I tell yer, he's a team! a powerful smart man if he would only let whisky alone, and what he don't know about this yer region ain't worth knowing; he's one of the old-timers hyer."

"Who is he?"

"Bowers—Joe Bowers."

"I don't think that I know him."

"He's a rattler, I tell yer!" cried Dancer, enthusiastically. "I'll fix up the thing for you."

"And the sooner the better; arrange it for to-morrow, if possible."

"All right; to-night as well as any time."

And so the interview ended.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE AVENGER.

At the close of the sheriff's interview with the Governor, he descended to the bar-room of the hotel, and addressing the affable gentleman who presided over the creature comforts so dear to the heart of the average miner, inquired if he knew Mr. Bowers.

And the bar-keeper did; although the genial Bowers had not as yet tarried long in Cinnabar, yet he had contrived to make himself pretty well known, particularly to the "tumbler-jugglers" of the town.

"A fat bummer?" queried the bar-keeper, "the biggest beat that ever struck the town?"

The sheriff "allowed" that the description fitted his man to a hair.

"Oh, I know him! He's got more cheek than a government mule."

"What does he hang out? does he make his headquarters here?"

"What do you take this shebang to be?" cried the bar-keeper, in disgust. "This hyer shanty ain't no dive, but a first-class ranch; we didn't have any use for any sich men as he is, hanging 'round hyer!"

"Where will I be likely to find him?"

"Try the Break o' Day and the All Night saloons."

"All right, I will," and Dancer turned to depart.

"Hold on!" exclaimed the bar-keeper. "Is this hyer squar' that I hear about old Daily—that he was carried off last night by a gang?"

"So I heard. I reckon that it wasn't any of Judge Lynch's men; more like some of his pals."

"Mebbe so; sich things have been, and 'ever come us like a summer cloud,' you know," quoted the bar-keeper, who rather prided himself on his education. "But what I was trying to get at is this: have you notified his daughter?"

"No; I never thought about it; besides, the chances are that she knows all about it—prob-

ably she arranged the j-b. These women are up to mighty smart tricks sometimes."

"Well, this girl ain't one of that kind!" replied the bar-keeper, decidedly. "She is a lady, she is, and she ain't up to anything of that sort. I think you were barking up the wrong tree with Daily, anyway; but that's neither here nor there, of course, but you ought to notify the girl, and you might pick up a point or two who knows?"

Dancer had never made himself remarkable by any very great display of brains, but he had sense enough to know a good thing when he saw it, and so he at once thanked the bar-keeper for the suggestion and promised to act upon it. He inquired where the Dailys lived and went at once to the house.

Introducing himself as civilly as possible, for like all the rest of the town, the burly Dancer was at once very favorably impressed with the girl's looks—he related what had taken place.

Although the sheriff was not a particularly close observer, yet even to his dull eyes it was plain that the girl was really astonished and pained by the news, and when he gently hinted it was more than probable that the statement of the midnight visitors, that Judge Lynch directed their movements, was but a clever device to screen the rescue of the old man and prevent pursuit, she at once announced that she wished that she could think so, but did not.

"I am well acquainted with my father's affairs, and I am satisfied he never had any relations whatever with this man Talbot. I know my father was not connected with any of these men, and it was only the scheme of a bold, bad man, who had personal ends to serve, who gave rise to the accusation that he had ever, in any way outraged the law. And this personal enemy, who, I am satisfied, would not hesitate at anything to get my father in his power, so as to be able to compel him to do as he wished, is at the bottom of this midnight assault. He knew well enough that he had not a particle of proof to advance against my father; he knew that this morning, thanks to the skill of the legal gentlemen who had taken my father's case in hand, that he must be released, as there was not a bit of evidence to warrant holding him. There was only one thing for him to do—open, actual force must be used, since cunning had failed; hence this midnight abduction."

The sheriff listened in amazement; he couldn't make head or tail of this story; but he saw that the girl was thoroughly in earnest, and was fully convinced from her manner, that she spoke the truth—that she really was ignorant of all knowledge of her father's release from his prison-house.

The sheriff was not "a lady's man," and so he took his departure as soon as possible, as he felt awkward and uncomfortable. He promised to do all in his power to ascertain what had become of Daily, although he knew well enough that his efforts in that direction would not amount to much.

Left alone Cassandra gave herself up to deep thought. She well realized from whose hand had come the blow which had fallen so heavily upon her father—Brockford, her evil genius. Brockford, the man who, she felt perfectly satisfied, would not stop at anything to accomplish his purpose. It was the postmaster, who, at the head of the disguised band, had paid the nocturnal visit to the jail and by main force carried off her sire.

What would be his next movement?

The girl fairly trembled as she reflected upon the question. Already she had seen what Brockford had dared to do, and in her own mind was satisfied that he was capable of any crime.

And she was alone—all alone! No relative—not even a single friend to whom she might apply for counsel or assistance.

To the God of the fatherless alone could she appeal; but would He heed the prayer? or was it His decree that, for some inscrutable purpose, wrong for the time should triumph and virtue fail?

"Oh, Heaven save me from the power of this bold, bad man!" she cried, conscious that the blow which had fallen so heavily upon her father was in reality aimed directly at her.

And that great Providence that, with its all-seeing eye, noteth even the fall of a sparrow, sometimes responds almost immediately to the cry of the helpless and the distressed.

Hardly had the words escaped from her lips when there came a knock on the door.

Cassy opened it and beheld a man roughly dressed, miner fashion, with long, shaggy blonde hair and a smooth face.

"Can I speak a few words with you in private, miss?" he asked: "it concerns your father."

To use the old saying—the girl's heart was in her mouth at once. This was the messenger from Brockford whom she had expected. He had come to make known to her the terms that the capturer of her father had concluded to exact.

"Yes, sir; walk in," she replied. Her lips were white, her voice trembled, and the anguish of deadly fear tore at her heart.

The man came in respectfully enough, removing the old faded slouch hat which he wore as he did so.

He was not at all the sort of fellow whom the girl had expected to see, for there was a good look to his face. With the quick instinct of woman she at once formed a favorable opinion of the stranger, although he was roughly dressed, his hair untrimmed, his chin unshaven, looking in that uncertain state of transition like a stubble-field, which in a man looks worst; but there was a good expression in the dark eyes and about the resolute mouth, and a strange idea leaped up at once in Cassandra's mind that in this unknown man she would find a friend, although he did come as the messenger of the villain who had taken such pains to make her his prey. He might be Brockford's man, but she felt sure that he was not a villain at heart as was his master.

"I presume we are perfectly safe from observation here, miss?" he said, with one of those keen, cautious glances around him which are so natural to the mortal who leads a hunted life and who looks for an enemy in each bush.

"Yes, sir, I think so."

"Walls have ears, sometimes, you know, and when men's lives are at stake they can't be too careful."

"I am sure that there is not any danger of your being overheard here. We are all alone in the house, and it is clearly impossible for any one to hear what you say, even if any one should try to play the spy upon you."

"Have you been informed that your father was removed from the jail, last night?"

"Yes, sir; the sheriff has just been here."

"Your father is in a position of great danger."

"Alas, sir, so I feared!" the girl exclaimed, clasping her hands together in anguish.

"He is in the hands of reckless, desperate men, who will not hesitate at any crime."

"Too true—too true," she murmured. She thought of Brockford as she spoke.

"But, if you will trust in me, I can save him. My name is Richard Talbot—better known as Injun Dick."

CHAPTER XXXI.

A TERRIBLE ORDEAL.

DAILY had not attempted to remonstrate with his captors, although he had very little doubt that he had fallen into the power of men who meant him harm. He knew well enough that he had no friends who would attempt to hold a step; and then, too, his affairs were not in such a desperate state as to require it. With the morrow freedom would most surely come, and it was quite plain to him that, knowing this fact, his enemy—for one man only in all this world he counted a foe—had determined since secret cunning had failed to use open force.

And that man—that enemy, Brockford, the postmaster, was hurried onward by the violent passion which he had conceived for the beautiful Cassandra; little mercy, too, the old man knew he could expect, for he rightly read Brockford's character—cruel and unscrupulous, he recked not of the means he used so long as the end he wished was attained.

Brockford, he felt sure, was the instigator of this high-handed proceeding, probably was the leader of this masked band who had so unceremoniously plucked him from the fastness of the Cinnabar jail, but as he rode along through the darkness of the night, helpless in the hands of his captors, the old man smiled grimly as he reflected that if he remained firm, his persecutor would have his labor for his pains, and he mentally resolved that he would not yield an inch although death stared him in the face. Brockford would not dare surely to proceed to the last extremity.

At a certain point in the journey the masked men blindfolded their prisoner, and Daily took this as a certain and sure indication that he was about to be carried back to Cinnabar City, and he inwardly laughed at having so easily penetrated the shrewd device of his captors.

"This fellow is a cool hand," he mused, "but for once he will find that he has met his match."

In a little while the party halted, and the prisoner was commanded to dismount.

This operation performed, Daily's hand was grasped by a rough, rude fist, and he was cautioned to follow his guide and to tread carefully.

Other faculties being rendered more acute by the one of sight being suspended, the old man became sensible that he was being conducted into a building, and this only served to confirm Daily's suspicions that he had been brought back again into the city; then he was warned that he was about to descend steps.

"Aha, they are going to take me into some cellar," the prisoner thought. And the darkness of the air, which was plainly perceptible as the steps were descended, told the old man that this idea was correct.

When the level was reached, he was conducted to a seat, and at a signal from the chief of the band, the scarf which covered Daily's eyes was removed, and he once more had the use of his eyes.

The old gentleman looked around him, curious to learn whither he had been conducted.

The underground retreat of the Black-hoods is already familiar to our readers, and it was in

this mysterious apartment that Daily found himself, but to his soul it possessed no terrors, for he had not the remotest idea of where he was, but fully and firmly believed that he was in some cellar in the heart of Cinnabar City.

The sight of Brockford sitting upon the other side of the table to which he had been conducted, served to confirm him.

The postmaster looked just about the same as ever, wore no disguise upon his face, although Daily was certain that he had been one of the masked men who had forcibly abducted him from the jail, displayed no weapons, and, in fact, did not appear at all threatening, but the four other men in the apartment sported the dreaded, the noted disguise of the Black-hoods, and which had given rise to their appellation.

But even this did not affright the captive, for he had not the slightest idea that the men he saw really were the Black-hoods. On the contrary, he believed that the scene had been cunningly contrived to terrify him into yielding compliance with the postmaster's wishes.

Brockford began the conversation.

"I hope, Mr. Daily, that you will pardon the rather peculiar means which I have seen fit to adopt in this matter," he said, with a slight smile which displayed his teeth in a very wolf-like way, "but you are too old a gamester to complain, I know, for, like myself, I am sure that you always play to win, by fair means if you can, but by foul if the game can't be won any other way. The end justifies the means, you know; it's a good old adage and a very wise one."

Daily nodded; it was his policy just now to let the postmaster do all the talking. He wanted his adversary, in sporting parlance, to display his hand.

"You know what I am driving at, of course?"

"No, really I do not," Daily replied, with a look of profound ignorance upon his face.

"Your daughter, Mr. Daily, the fair Cassandra, most beautiful of women!" exclaimed Brockford, grandiloquently.

"What of her?"

"You know the sentiments that I entertain for her."

"But they are not reciprocated."

"Oh, that doesn't trouble me, in the least," Brockford replied, in the most confident way. "You have undoubtedly lived long enough in the world to understand that a woman is a most uncertain creature. She often says no, when she means yes, and I have quite confidence enough in myself to believe that if I had a good fair chance I could succeed in inducing your daughter to favor my suit."

"I am quite sure that you overestimate your capabilities in that line," Daily observed, dryly.

"Oh, no; I have a very persuasive way with me, sometimes," and Brockford, as he uttered the speech, leaned over the table and displayed his teeth in a way which clearly showed that the speech concealed a threat. "Besides," he continued, "I rely upon you to aid me in my purpose."

"I couldn't do you any good even if I should try."

"Now you underrate your abilities!" the postmaster persisted. "Oh, there isn't the slightest doubt about that. I know that when Cassandra comes here, and sees the plight you are in, that she will be willing to do almost anything to get you out of the hobble."

A nervous shiver crept over Daily as he listened to this cool speech despite his endeavors to remain insensible to fear.

"I don't exactly understand what you are driving at," the old man said, with a wonderful effort to appear at his ease.

"Oh, I suppose you think that this is all a joke, then?" Brockford exclaimed, roughly.

"Don't you know where you are? Don't you recognize these sharps? Don't you realize that to hire these men to snake you out of that Cinnabar jail has cost me a heap of money, and what do you suppose I've gone to all this trouble for? Oh, no! I mean business, Mr. Daily, every time. I've got you foul, and I intend to use you as a means to secure Cassandra; and as the first move in the game I want you to indite a letter to her."

There were writing materials on the table, evidently having been prepared for this purpose, and Brockford took up a pen, toyed with it for a moment in thought, and then commenced to write; reading the words aloud as he indited them:

"MY DEAR CASSANDRA:—Thanks to some very good friends of mine, I have been rescued from the peril that threatened me and am now safe in a secure retreat in the mountains, quite beyond the reach of my pursuers. It is important that I should see you as soon as possible, and as I do not dare to come to Cinnabar City, you will be obliged to come to me. The bearer of this note is thoroughly trustworthy, despite his rough appearance, and you can rely upon him to conduct you safely to my hiding-place. You must leave the town under cover of the night and take all possible precautions that you are not watched and followed, for such an accident would be sure to place my enemies on my track again. Come at once without fear, and in a few days we will be able to leave this section, never to return."

Brockford tossed the pen over to the other side of the table.

man, pushed a sheet of paper and the ink-stand to his side of the table.

"Now then, just you copy that, sign your name to it, and I will see that it is delivered, all right."

For a few minutes Daily remained silent, his brows knitted in thought. He understood well enough that if he did write and sign the papers, it would most surely place his daughter helpless in the power of Brockford, and now for the first time he began to realize what kind of a man he had to deal with. He believed that the postmaster was something of a rascal, but he had no idea that he was so unscrupulous a villain.

The old man was not composed of exactly the stuff that heroes are made of; still he had something manly about him, and so he shook his head firmly and declared:

"I will not aid to place my girl in your power."

"You will change your mind upon reflection."

"No, sir, I will not."

"Oh, I am sure you will; I know I can persuade you, or else you are a tougher piece of humanity than I take you to be," Brockford replied, grimly; then he motioned to the outlaws, and they took the old man and placed him in a curiously-contrived cage in the corner. It was so arranged that the occupant was obliged to remain in a standing posture, supported only by a bar placed under the chin.

And in this cruel cage, without food or water, they kept the old man, until at last he could endure the torture no longer, and in agony he cried:

"Let me out; I will write!"

And the outlaws roared as if it was all a capital joke.

"Oh-ho!" cried the postmaster, in sarcasm; "didn't I tell you, friend Daily, that I was sure that I should be able to persuade you?"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE LETTER.

AFTER the night of the row at the Bella Union saloon, the dashing Nic had been burning with a desire to be avenged upon the man who had wronged her, but Brockford's abrupt disappearance from the town interfered with her purpose, therefore as she could not call him to account personally, she determined to do him all the damage she could, indirectly.

Her first move was to call upon Miss Daily.

Of course Nic had no means of ascertaining exactly how matters stood between the two, but she had an idea that a love affair was going on between them, and, as she tersely expressed it, she had made up her mind to have a finger in the pie.

She went directly to the house, knocked at the door, and when Cassandra answered the summons, proceeded at once to business.

"I've come to see you on a very important matter," she said, "and I would like to have a private interview with you."

Now Miss Daily had no more knowledge of the existence of the girl of the Bella Union than she had of the man in the moon, and was considerably surprised by the request, but so many strange things had occurred lately that she was in a measure prepared for almost anything, so she invited the girl to enter.

Nic, who was nothing if not impulsive, plunged at once into the matter.

"I suppose you know who I am?" she said.

"I'm Nic—Nic of the Bella Union."

Cassy shook her head; not only was Nic unknown to her, but even the very existence of the notorious concert saloon. Small as was the lively city of Cinnabar, the Bella Union had never fallen under her observation.

"Well, I supposed that you knew me!" Nic exclaimed, considerably astonished at Miss Daily's ignorance, for in the plenitude of her pride, the saloon belle imagined that everybody knew her, so strong is the intoxication of popular success with these children of the boards.

"No, miss; I never heard of you."

"But you know Mr. Brockford, though?" replied Nic, just a little bit spitefully.

Cassandra's face darkened; the very mention of the name of the postmaster was enough to cloud all her sunshine.

"Yes, I know Mr. Brockford," she answered, after quite a pause.

Nic, keen at reading faces, saw that her mention of Brockford's name had pained her hearer, and that, although the postmaster might be in love with Miss Daily, it was quite certain she did not return his passion.

The Bella Union beauty was delighted; Brockford's discomfiture was her triumph.

"I see I have been laboring under a wrong impression," she said, coming promptly to the point. "I had an idea that the man I named was a favorite of yours, but I can see by the expression upon your face that he is not."

"Mr. Brockford is no favorite of mine," Cassandra replied, promptly.

"I'm glad of that, for he is as black-hearted a villain as can be found west of the mountains. Let me tell you my story." And then, without more ado, she related her experience with the postmaster.

Miss Daily listened, intently.

"You do not surprise me at all," she said, after Nic had finished her recital. "I have been fully satisfied for some time that this man is capable of any crime to attain the end he seeks."

"And you don't care a pin for him, then?"

"Care for him!" Cassandra exclaimed, her pale face flushing up. "I utterly hate and detest him."

"So do I!" Nic cried, "and I had made up my mind to call him to an account, too, but he's got out of the way; gone up into the mountains, they say."

Again Miss Daily looked anxious; in some inexplicable way she connected Brockford's absence with that of her father.

"Well that's all I've got to say," observed Nic, rising to depart. "I only wanted to tell you what a rascal this man is, but as you've found it out for yourself, I might have spared myself the trouble; but I didn't know but what he was making a fool of you just as he did of me. I flatter myself that I ain't very dull—in fact, that I'm tolerably sharp, but Mr. Brockford did pull the wool over my eyes, splendidly. Why! I thought he was just a grand creature when I first made his acquaintance! To hear him talk, down in Frisco, one would have thought he owned about all this town, but, after I got up here it didn't take me long to find out exactly what kind of a man he was. But I'll get square with him, one of these days. Good-by!" And then Nic departed.

As she closed the door she came face to face with a tall, lank, roughly-dressed man, who was evidently looking for some particular house.

"Does Mr. Daily live hyer?" he asked.

Nic nodded; she did not dare to speak for fear that the man might recognize her voice, for she had identified the fellow at once; he was one of the men who had kicked up the disturbance in the variety saloon—one of Brockford's tools, she was sure, and he was in search of Miss Daily.

With the girl to think was to act, and so, calculating that the man would probably take ten or fifteen minutes to deliver his message (for that he brought a message from the postmaster she was sure), Nic resolved to prepare herself to play the spy upon him when he should depart.

Away then she hurried, while the man went up to the door of the house and knocked.

He, less keen of eye than the girl, had not recognized her. He had never seen her except on the stage, and the delusive arts of the theater made her look quite different to what she did in the broad glare of the daylight.

When Miss Daily answered the knock, the man at once accosted her:

"This is Miss Daily, ain't it?"

She replied at once in the affirmative.

"Is there anybody around, miss, wot kin hear wot I say?" he asked, mysteriously.

"No, sir."

"Because I come on mighty 'tickular business."

"You can speak freely, sir; there is no danger of your being overheard."

"I bring you a message from your father."

"From my father?"

"Yes, but don't speak so loud, miss, because it would be mighty ugly for him if the sharps in this hyer town got wind of whar he is."

"You had better come in, sir; then there won't be any danger of any one overhearing us."

The man accepted the invitation and entered the house, closing the door carefully behind him; then he produced a letter from an inside pocket and tendered it to the girl.

"Here's a few lines from your father, miss."

With trembling hands Cassandra opened the letter and in eager haste read the contents.

She seemed puzzled, and the man, who was watching her closely, noticed that she read the letter over a second time, evidently perplexed.

"My father cannot return to Cinnabar, then?" she asked.

"No, miss; it would be as much as his life is worth. You see what he says there."

"You know the contents of this letter, then?"

"Oh, yes, miss; he read it to me afore I started, so that in case of accident, s'posin' that I was overhauled, I was to destroy the letter and give you the message by word of mouth but I come through all right and safe."

"I am to start at night—"

"Yes, miss; and you better say to-night if you kin possibly get ready, for thar ain't no time to lose."

"To-night I will be ready."

There was just a little twinkle of satisfaction in the fellow's dull eyes as she fixed the time so promptly.

"I will be on hand, miss; shall I come for you hyer or had we better arrange a meeting-place outside the town somewhar?"

"The latter plan I think is the best, for if my father's foes are on the watch, we might be followed."

"You know the trail that leads up the river?"

"Yes."

"Thar's a bend in it by a big rock, just outside the town."

"I know the place."

"I will wait for you there just after dark."

"I will be prompt."
"All right; and mind, don't say a word 'bout the thing for fear that the hawks might come down onto us."
"Trust me; I will be careful."
And so the interview ended.
About half-past eight that night the girl was first at the appointed place.
The moon was rising slowly and cast a dim light over the Shasta valley.
Soon the messenger came.
"Well, mi's, you are right up to time, I see, and now we'd better be going."
"Stay a moment," said the girl; "here is an old friend of my father who wishes to go, too."
And then out from the shelter of the rock stepped a well-built, muscular man, hugely bearded and roughly clad.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE FRIEND.

To say that the messenger was astounded by the unexpected appearance of the stranger would be but to mildly state the facts of the case.

His first thought was that he was entrapped, and with an oath he whipped out his revolver, but at this game Jack was equally as good as his master, to use the old saying, and the newcomer had the messenger "covered" by his weapon before the latter could bring his pistol to a level.

"Ho! on, ho! on! don't be hasty, my friend, or I shall have to lore you," the stranger cautioned.

"Gal, I never reckoned that you would get me into a trap!" the enraged man exclaimed.

"It is no trap, sir," Cassandra replied; "it is simply as I told you; this gentleman is a friend of my father's, and he wishes to go with me so as to be sure that no harm may come to me."

"Why, you ain't afraid, are you?"

"You are a stranger to me, and even though you do bring me a message from my father, it is but natural that I should hesitate to trust myself entirely to your care."

"Well, if this hyer game of yours brings the dogs of the law down onto your father, why, you'll only have yourself to blame for it, that's all," the man replied, sulkily.

"What's the use of talking that way?" the stranger cried, tartly. "I ain't any dog of the law, no way you kin fix it. I'm an old pard of this hyer young lady's father, and I just struck this town to-day, so I ain't got anything to do with this hyer quarrel, anyway, 'cept to back up my old friend a' I kin, and if I kin do him any good, or his daughter any good, why, I'm the man for their money, and that's all that there is about it."

The messenger took a good look at the stranger; the moon afforded ample light for the scrutiny. As we have said, he was a good-sized fellow, roughly dressed and bearded hugely; well-armed, too; and, take him all in all, he looked like a man who in a skirmish would be apt to prove a pretty tough customer to handle.

The messenger certainly came to this conclusion, and also that the man had better not accompany the girl.

"Well, I'm sorry, miss, but I can't take you if this gentleman comes," he declared.

"And why not?" the other demanded, with considerable asperity.

"Why not? 'Cos I don't choose to, and that's why not!" the messenger retorted.

"I've a good mind to bore you," the other said, the pistol still leveled. "For two cents I would bore you. I've settled the hash of many a better-looking man than you are."

"You just give me a chance for my money!" growled the messenger, chafing at the advantage so cleverly gained by the other.

"O no, it's my little game to have the butt-end of a bargain, every time," the stranger replied. "Just you say the word, miss, and I'll let daylight right through this fellow. It's my opinion that he's trying to come some kind of a gun game, anyway."

"Oh no, let there be no bloodshed!" Cassandra hastened to say. "If he does not wish to conduct us to my father, why he can go his way and we can return to the town."

"Sartin; that's O. K.!" the man exclaimed.

The messenger was in a quandary; he knew not what to do, for affairs had taken a turn entirely unexpected.

"Why, miss, you won't go back on your father's letter?" he demanded. "Don't he say that you kin trust me; so what are you afraid of?"

"I wouldn't trust you with a dead gopher's skin!" cried the stranger, in contempt.

"It is true that my father, in his letter, tells me to place perfect faith in you, his messenger, but he did not know when he wrote the letter that his old friend had arrived in town; he thought I was utterly helpless and without a protector. I am sure if he had known this gentleman was in Cinnabar he most surely would have sent a message to him."

"His old side-pardner, you mule-driver, do you mind that?" the stranger exclaimed. "The clear white article from A toizzard, and no mistake! Man's man has led you and made

well of it! I'm Jake Skinner, I am, the square man from Angel's Camp."

"This gentleman, I am sure, is as good a friend as my father has in the world," the girl hastened to say.

"I can't help that," the messenger replied, doggedly. "My orders were to bring you alone, and I don't see no call to go back of the orders."

"I will not go without this gentleman," the girl persisted, decidedly.

"Good-night to you, then," and the messenger started off.

"We have failed!" Cassandra cried under her breath, to the stranger.

"Don't be sure of that. This fellow, I think, will change his mind," in cautious tones.

He was right. Before the messenger had taken a hundred steps he turned and began to retrace his steps.

"See hyer!" he exclaimed, as he came up, "I reckon that I'll get myself in a heap of trouble if I allow this man to come along."

"I don't see it!" Skinner rejoined, promptly.

"My old pard, Daily, will be powerful glad to see me, and I know he'll say that you did jest the right thing in fetching me along."

"I feel sure that my father will not object," Cassandra added.

"Well, miss, you'll have to take the blame if there is any row raised."

"That I will, gladly."

"And, Mr. Skinner, you'll have to keep a shut mouth about the place whar I'm going to take you to," the messenger cautioned.

"Sartin! Oh! you kin depend upon me. I tell you, I'm the right kind of man to tie to!"

"I give you fair warning, you know, for the men who have protected your father, miss, from his enemies, have about all they kin do to look out for themselves, and of course if any stranger should learn the secret of their hiding-place in the mountains, and then betray it to the authorities, it would be all up with them."

"My friend and backer, I'll be as dumb as an eyester!" Mr. Skinner replied, solemnly.

"Come along, then, for we've got considerable of a tramp before us," and the "procession" started.

Hardly had the three disappeared in the gloom, taking the trail up along the banks of the river, when from a little clump of bushes, about a hundred feet from the spot where the interview had taken place, came a slight, boyish figure, and like a sleuth-hound on the trail, followed closely in the footsteps of the three.

The guide led them straight to the old log-house situated in the woods, and which was reached by the blind trail.

In the house—in utter darkness—again the guide impressed upon the two the importance of secrecy; then through the secret way by means of the fire-place they descended to the underground regions, and swinging open the door, the messenger ushered the pair into the domains of the outlaws who had for so long reigned with bloody hands amid the hills of Shasta.

The door swung to, behind the pair, and they found themselves in the presence of the dreaded Black-hoods.

"At last, Cassandra Daily, you are mine!" cried the Black-hood leader, throwing aside his disguise and revealing the face of Brockford.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE GOVERNOR'S PLAN.

THE more the Governor thought over the idea which the astute Mr. Dancer had suggested the more he became convinced that it was the best plan to save him from the wrath of the man whom he had so wantonly provoked.

"Curse this infernal country, anyway!" he muttered, as he stretched himself upon the sofa in his little parlor and prepared to enjoy an after-dinner smoke. "Hang me if I ever got into such a hole before. Why, there's no law or anything else up in this wild region. I suppose if this fellow, Talbot, should 'plug' me, as they elegantly term it up here, the chances are just about ten to one that the majority of the people would consider it served me just right. I know one thing well enough, and that is—if I ever got out of here with a whole skin and reach Sacramento in safety, they never will catch me in these northern wilds again. And Brockford wants to rope me in to invest in the Cinnabar mine! He says it won't be necessary for me to ever come here—that he will attend to my interests; but, who'll attend to him, I'd like to know? Oh, no! I've had all I want of this country; all I ask now is to get safely out of it, and I think that by means of this scheme that Dancer has suggested I shall be able to do that, all right."

The attempt to escape had been arranged for that night, and the official ardently and anxiously waited for the appointed hour to come: waited, fretting and chafing and disgusted; until at last the long weary day came to a close and darkness began to draw its sable mantle over the earth.

Everything had been so carefully planned that it seemed impossible any mortal within the town of Cinnabar should have the slightest suspicion that the Governor of the great State of California intended to fly like a thief in the

night in order to escape the vengeance of the man whose anger he had so wantonly provoked.

The politician had provided a rough suit, regular mountain fashion, a broad brimmed hat, big boots and everything in keeping. After dark he dressed himself up in this suit, pulled the big hat over his eyes, locked his door carefully so that no chance caller might discover his absence; then slouched down the stairs into the main saloon and out into the street, proceeding at once to the stables in the rear of the Occidental.

So far all had gone well; the politician's disguise was perfect, and it would have required a keen eye to have detected that he was anything but what he seemed.

The horses had been arranged for in advance; a good beast had been brought and left at the stable for Mr. Black who would call for it. And when "Mr. Black" called for the horse brought he settled the stable-bill, mounted, and rode off slowly through the main street of the town, exciting no attention whatever, for such mounted pilgrims were common enough. At last he reached the suburbs of the town, and just beyond the last house two men and two horses were standing, the men on foot leaning on their saddles and conversing busily.

"Hallo, is that you, Mr. Black?" exclaimed one of the two, a rather short, thick-set, "fat" man, as the Governor came up.

"That's my name," he said, reining in his horse.

The other two at once leaped to their saddles.

"Well, I allowed that it was you," said the man who had previously spoken. "It does me proud to make your acquaintance, sir. My name is Bowers; of course you have heard of me. I am the old original Joe Bowers. I'm the cove wot they made the song up about:

"Oh, me name it is Joe Bowers,
From England I did come—"

But, that ain't so, for I'm a good old American, all the way from old Kentucky—one of the half-horse, half-alligator breed."

"I'm glad to meet you, sir."

"And this hyer is my friend, Mr. Turtle," and the other horseman ducked his head at the introduction. "He's one of the noblest Romans of them all. He never says much, but when he does speak he just spits out the solid chunks of wisdom."

"Well, gentlemen, I suppose we had better be traveling," suggested the Governor, anxious to be rid of the sight and sound of Cinnabar.

"Right you are, pardner; we'll git up and dust," responded Mr. Bowers, graciously, and set out at a brisk canter.

The moon, which was an early riser as it happened, creeping up the dark heavens, afforded the travelers light for their journey.

Down the valley they went, following the course of the Shasta, and heading straight for Yreka.

Soon they passed out of sight of the town, and the politician began to breathe easier. After all, the escape from the district haunted by the outlaw was not going to be so difficult.

The Governor's spirits began to rise; a brisk gallop on a pleasant moonlight night is not a bad tonic for a low-spirited, nervous man to take.

And so, after a sharp half-hour's gallop, as they eased their horses to breathe them a bit, he felt like talking.

"You are well acquainted with the road, I presume," he said to Bowers.

"Oh, yes; I know every inch of the way," that worthy responded. "Why, pardner, I've hoofed it over this hyer trail more times than you've got fingers and toes. Oh, I tell yer! I know this country like a book. Why, I was jest a youngster when I first came hyer; it's a long time ago—so long ago, that old Shasta warn't half so big as it is now," and the bumper waved his hand to where the grand old peak towered above the rest of the mountain chain. "Yes, sree! it was only a kind of medium-sized, common mountain when I first knew it. Oh, I tell yer it has grown."

The Governor smiled at the guide's exaggeration.

"Well, I'm glad you are well acquainted with the way, for I am not," he said, "since there is a possibility that I may have some trouble on the road."

"So the pilgrim that made the contract with us said," Bowers remarked.

"Oh! you understood then that you might have to do some fighting?"

"Yes, sir; that war included in the contract. We war to see you safe to Yreka, guide you there, and if any weak-minded brother attempted to stop you on the way, we war to salivate him fer all that he war worth."

"I don't hardly think that there will be any trouble, though," the Governor observed, quite cheerfully, and, indeed, he felt quite happy over the prospect.

"Well, thar's no tellin'; you know things are mighty unsartin sometimes."

"I don't think there is much danger. I got

into a little difficulty with a certain party, and I didn't know but what he might attempt to waylay me with a gang; you know men do that sort of thing sometimes, up in this wild region."

"Oh, yes, frequently; but I tell you, stranger, it will have to be a good-sized gang to get away with us. We're well heeled, both of us, and though I say so I shouldn't, we kin handle our weapons, we kin. We don't take a back seat for any man in all this big golden state of California."

"I'm glad to hear it; although I feel pretty certain that you won't have to display your prowess in that line."

"We ought to earn our money, you know," Bowers suggested.

"I ain't anxious to see you do it in that way," the politician laughingly responded.

But his merriment had an untimely check, for upon emerging from the valley through which they had been passing to the table-lands above, there, in the center of the road, within easy ride range upon his steed, sat the well-known figure of Captain Dick Talbot!

CHAPTER XXXV.

A VERY FAIR OFFER.

THE three simultaneously pulled rein upon coming upon the horseman so unexpectedly, for owing to the nature of the ground they had not been able to perceive him until close upon him.

It was Dick Talbot, sure enough; he sat upon his horse with his face toward the valley from whence the party had just emerged, evidently on the watch for them; in his hands he had his rifle cocked and leveled, and although the others were three to one, yet he, from the nature of the surprise, had a most decided advantage.

The Governor turned pale as death and fairly reeled in the saddle with terror, but neither Bowers nor his companion seemed at all affected.

"I am waiting for you, you see!" cried Talbot, as the party pulled rein. "I gave you fair warning that you couldn't get out of this Shasta valley without having a settlement with me, and when you come to know me as well as some of the men in the town of Cinnabar have known me in the old time, you will discover that I am generally a man of my word with either friend or foe."

"What do you want with me?" exclaimed the politician, his face pale and his voice trembling. "Satisfaction!" responded Talbot, fiercely.

The Governor became almost wild with fear.

"This is the man I fear!" he cried to Bowers; "out with your weapons and down with him!"

Mr. Bowers shook his head slowly.

"Really, judge," he said, "you are piling it on altogether too thick. Generally I am jest as brave as a lion—jest as hungry for blood and slaughter as any meat-eater that you ever did see, but on this hyer occasion, I really think that I shall have to 'pass' and let you go it alone. Parlor, in this hyer deal I can't assist."

"Do you think that these men are ready to throw their lives away at your bidding?" Talbot demanded. "They took your gold-dust and agreed to conduct you safely to Yreka, but you did not tell them in advance that it was more than likely that Dick Talbot would bar the way. And if they were mad enough to show fight, what chance do they stand? With the advantage that I now possess I could pick both of them off before they could get a weapon out, much less raise the hammer and take aim. Governor, you are like Captain Scott's coon; you are treed, and you had better come down."

"Men, will you see me murdered in cold blood?" the Governor cried, in terror.

"Oh, I reckon, pardner, that it won't be quite as bad as that. Captain Dick allers gives his men a fair chance for their lives," Bowers replied; "that's his style, you bet!"

"Governor, you are in a trap, and you are only wasting your breath by talking."

"What do you want?"

"Satisfaction! I told you that before."

"Would you murder me?"

"Oh, no; you have got the wrong idea entirely. I want satisfaction—the satisfaction that one gentleman who is injured feels that he has the right to demand of another gentleman," and Talbot bowed as politely as though the scene, instead of transpiring in a wild glade in the far Western wildernesses of the New World, was in a court of law.

"Oh, you mean a duel," and the Governor felt a little bit relieved at this discovery.

"Exactly, a duel."

"And the weapons?"

"That I leave to you; you, as the challenged party, have the right of choice. It is really immaterial to me—knives, pistols or rifles, it is all the same. Swords of course are out of the question, because we haven't any, and there is no chance of getting any."

This opportunity for a jest was too good for Bowers to fail to "put in."

"This gentleman," and he bowed gravely and courteously to the Governor, "is in no hurry, I am sure, and even if you had to send East for words, I am certain that he had just as best wait as not, like the Irishman who elected to be hung on a gooseberry bush, and when he was told that it was too small, he said that he was

in no hurry, and he would wait until it grew big enough."

A faint smile played about Talbot's lips; he had a keen appreciation of humor.

"Come, sir," he said, after a pause, finding that the Governor was not inclined to speak, "I am waiting on you."

At first to the mind of the official the proposal seemed fair enough, but when he came to reflect and remember what he had heard in regard to Talbot's skill with all kinds of weapons, he saw at once that he really stood no chance at all, for with no single weapon in the world could he with justice claim to be an expert.

"It is simply murder, sir, that you are proposing!" he exclaimed, excitedly. "You are expert with every weapon, I with none! What chance then do I stand if I accept your proposal and encounter you in single fight?"

"Well, now that you put the question so bluntly it does look as if you didn't stand much of a show, but, why in the name of common sense then did you pick a quarrel with such a man as I am?" Talbot demanded.

"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread!" Bowers observed, sententiously.

"I tell you what it is, Governor, we have got to have some kind of a settlement!" Talbot exclaimed, impatiently, "for you have put a deadly wrong upon me, and I swore to be even with you, and as you are ignorant of the use of all weapons, let us disarm, then, and settle our difficulty by hammering; each other with our fists until one of us cries enough!"

"That's the talk!" cried the bummer, in delight. "I'll be the referee!"

But this offer was just as distasteful to his excellency as the other, for he had heard all the particulars of the expert manner in which Talbot had handled the burly ruffian, and although he was a larger man than his antagonist, yet he had no idea of trying conclusions with his foe in any such way as that.

"No, sir; I am neither a bully nor a bruiser!" he protested.

"You're a terribly hard man to suit," Talbot remarked, quietly, and then a sudden idea came into his mind. "I'll tell you how we can fix it! I'll take two pistols, draw the loads out of one but leave the other loaded; we'll put them under a handkerchief, shut our eyes and each draw one; then place them to each other's breasts and pull the triggers; one of us will go straight to kingdom come and the other can mount his horse and ride off."

The Governor fairly shivered at this, to him, atrocious proposition.

"No, sir!" he cried, in horror, "I do not want to have anything to do with such an infernal scheme. Mr. Talbot, I throw myself upon your mercy. I am utterly in your power, perfectly helpless. You can kill me if you like and I won't raise a finger to prevent you, but I'm willing to buy my life; name any sum you please, and if it is possible for me to raise the money, you shall have it."

"I don't want your money," the other replied, sternly. "I only want satisfaction for the way that you tried to hunt me down."

At this point a bright idea flashed upon the official.

"I have it!" he exclaimed: "I'll make you the same offer that you made to me. Hunt down the Black-hoods and you shall have a full pardon."

"And what assurance have I that you will keep your word any better this time than you did before?"

"The assurance that I've felt your power and that I am not anxious to affront you again. I will remain in Cinnabar City until you either succeed or fail."

"Oh, I am not afraid of a failure," Talbot remarked, with a grim smile.

"I can't say anything fairer, and if I don't keep faith with you this time, why then make me answer for it."

"All right! It is a bargain," Talbot replied, after a few moments' thought. "Within a week at most I will agree to break up the Black-hood band, to either exterminate them, bring them prisoners into Cinnabar, or else drive them away from this district altogether."

"Do it and you shall have a full pardon!"

"I shall hold you to your word, mind! And now, men, escort his excellency back to Cinnabar!" And with the command Talbot wheeled his horse and galloped away, while the little cavalcade set out on their return.

The Governor felt that he had had a lucky escape, and he thanked his lucky stars that he had got off so safely.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A HOLIDAY FOR AN OLIVER.

IT was quite a striking picture, and if the girl and her escort, the acute Mr. Skinner, were surprised by what they saw, the Black-hoods were no less surprised by the entirely unexpected entrance of the stranger when they had only thought to see the girl and their messenger.

Brockford had shown his hand, though regardless of the other presence, but the moment he had allowed his triumph to find expression he looked at his messenger for an explanation.

"Who is this man?" he cried.

Old Daily sat in the background, wan and weak, and at the first glance it was quite apparent that he was a helpless prisoner in the hands of the desperate road-agents. Cassandra would have flown to his side, but the strangeness of the situation in a measure held her paralyzed.

"Jake Skinner is what I call myself now!" the man replied, promptly, in a loud, boisterous tone; "but mebbe I've had other handles in my time like the most of people in this hyer region; but what is it to you, anyway? Who are you? It seems to me that you're putting on a heap of style."

"You'll find out who I am before you are an hour older, you loud-mouthed rascal!" Brockford exclaimed, enraged at the boldness of the man.

"Rascal yourself, you ugly-faced villain!" cried Skinner, defiantly. "You needn't think that you kin scare me with your big words or your scowls. I've seen worse-looking cusses than you are, a heap sight, and I wasn't skeered much, either."

"Who is this fool?" Brockford demanded.

"Fool yourself!" Skinner retorted.

"He says that he's an old friend—a pardner of Daily, and he insisted upon coming, and in fact, the girl wouldn't come unless he came, too," the messenger explained. "I wasn't going to bring either of 'em at first; but then, I knew, cap'n, that you wanted the gal, and I thought that there was enough of us hyer to handle him; and then, mebbe he might be worth going through."

"Well, Mr. Skinner, you've run your head into pretty considerable of a trap, as I reckon you will discover before long," Brockford remarked. "And so, Daily, this is an old partner of yours?"

The old gentleman looked at the man earnestly for a moment, but no sign of recognition appeared upon his face.

"You don't seem to remember him?" Brockford observed.

"Angel's Camp, you know," interposed Mr. Skinner.

Again Daily shook his head.

"I really don't remember," he said, slowly, and it was quite plain both from his voice and manner that he was sinking rapidly. The terrible ordeal through which he had passed had been too much for him.

"Well, it don't make a particle of difference whether you are what you claim to be or not; I don't care two cents!" Brockford cried; "but the chances are just now that you won't get out of this place alive. And as for you, Miss Cassandra, I presume you understand that at last you are entirely in my power. I was bound to have you, at any cost, and so I snatched your father from the jail in Cinnabar City on purpose to use him as a lure to entice you here. My plan has succeeded in every particular, and at last I hold you completely and utterly at my mercy."

"My child, for Heaven's sake forgive me the part that I have been compelled to play in this matter!" old Daily exclaimed, in a voice tremulous with emotion; "but if you only knew the tortures that I have suffered at the hands of this fiend, and it was only when poor weak nature could endure no more, and I believed myself near to death's door, that I yielded; I cannot forgive myself for the weak, unmanly yielding, but I am going to be justly punished. I sacrificed you, my child, to save myself, but it is of no avail, for I feel that death's cold hand is pressing heavily upon me, and I am sure that I am not long for this world."

Instantly Cassandra hastened to her father and knelt by his side.

"Oh, no, father, it cannot be true!" she exclaimed, overcome with grief. "Heaven cannot be so cruel as to let you perish and leave me helpless in the power of this cold, bad man."

"You are extremely candid if not complimentary!" Brockford sneered; "but I reckon after I've had you some time I'll make you sing another tune."

"Oh, no, you will not!" cried the now thoroughly enraged girl, springing to her feet and drawing her fine figure up to its fullest height, "for here, at the very moment of your utter triumph, I scorn and defy you!"

"Enough of this!" exclaimed Brockford, exasperated almost beyond endurance. "We're fooling too long over this matter—wasting too much time; I'll show you, you proud minx, inside of five minutes, how utterly helpless you are. Seize that fellow and tie him up!" and he pointed to Skinner as he gave the command.

"Try it!" cried Skinner, quickly, and in an entirely different voice from the one that he had previously used, much to the astonishment of the outlaws, and with the words he dashed away the wig and false beard that he wore, whirled out a pair of cocked revolvers, and lo! Captain Dick Talbot stood revealed!

The outlaws were astounded; never had men been more completely taken by surprise, for the action on the part of the stranger whom they believed to be fully in their power was entirely unexpected.

In truth, before the stranger made the move it would have seemed only more madness for

him to attempt to cope with the desperate men by whom he was surrounded.

But, now that the movement had been successfully executed, it was not such an uneven thing, after all, particularly when two dark figures with drawn revolvers glided in through the heavy door, which the messenger had neglected to fasten after him. Upon such little things sometimes great consequences depend.

And it was to give these two men time to come to his assistance that Talbot had been talking against time, delaying action all he could.

And the two brave hearts who had dared the perils of the outlaws' den to come to the assistance of their chief! No doubt the reader can easily name them. When Dick Talbot went, on desperate adventures bent; the stanch Indian chief, Mud-turtle, and the irrepressible bum-mer, Joe Bowers, were certain to be near at hand.

And with the appearance of the two, their weapons out and ready for a fight, matters were pretty nearly equalized.

The Black-hoods were five to three, but then in a hand-to-hand encounter like this, where the quick snap-shot told, Talbot was worth two or three ordinary men. And then, too, Injun Dick and his men had their revolvers out ready cocked for action, while the outlaws had yet to raise the hammers of their weapons.

A cry of rage came from the lips of Brockford despite his iron will and his great habit of self-control as his eyes fell upon the face of the fat bum-mer.

At last he understood how thoroughly and completely he had been tricked.

Bowers saw that he was recognized, but it did not disturb him in the least.

"How are you, pardner?" he exclaimed, nodding to the enraged postmaster in the most friendly way in the world. "Do you know that I kinder reckoned that I'd meet you somewhere afore long?"

"You infernal villain! You have been betraying me all the time then!" cried the exasperated Brockford.

"Bucher is the game, pardner, and if you get skinned on a lone hand once in a while, you mustn't complain."

Brockford was fairly furious; to be so completely baffled at the very moment when he thought victory secure within his grasp was terribly galling.

He was desperate, reckless whether he lived or died so that he could compass the destruction of his foes. Like Sampson of old, he was willing to perish within the temple, provided that he brought destruction upon his enemies as well as upon himself.

"Go for 'em, boys!" he cried; "it's life or death now!"

But the "boys" were not in the least disposed to rush to what seemed to be almost certain death.

"Hol' on!" cried the tall, lanky, Yankee-like road-agent; "let's fix this thing up. Dog don't eat dog, you know, and as all us gents are in about the same line of business, I don't see why we shouldn't straighten this hyer thing out without spilling a pail of gore. I own right up that I ain't got any stomach for a fight unless I've got my own way, and in this hyer matter I really reckon that this gent and his pards has rung in a cold deal on us. I'm quite willing to cry quits ef you folks ar'."

Brockford in desperation glared round at the faces of the others, and he immediately perceived that his men were all of one mind. The prowess of Captain Dick Talbot had had due weight with them, and not of their own free will would they risk a fight with him and his men.

"No, sir-ee, none of it in mine, thank you," continued the tall fellow; "take the gal and git, and we'll call it square; that's what I say."

"There's only one objection to this little arrangement," Talbot replied, "and that is that I have made an agreement with the Governor of the State of California to break up the outlaw gang known as the Black-hoods."

The under jaws of the desperadoes dropped; such information coming from the lips of a man like Injun Dick was no idle talk.

"But, I want to do the fair thing, seeing that you are inclined to be reasonable," Talbot remarked, after a pause. "If I understand things rightly, Mr. Brockford is spoiling for a fight, and I'm quite willing to accommodate him. I'll meet him in single fight, and, throwing aside the advantage that I now possess, stake all upon the issue. If he overcomes me, why, my men will retire and wage no battle; but if I am the victor in the struggle, you Black-hoods must give up your wild and lawless life, leave this section forever, and the Shasta valley must know you no more. Come! what do you say?"

CHAPTER XXXVII. THE ORDEAL OF BATTLE.

It certainly was an extremely fair proposal, much more liberal than the Black-hoods could in reason have hoped for, and they looked anxiously at the chief in order to see how he regarded the matter.

To give Brockford full justice he had a sort of

bull-dog courage, although he was generally shrewd enough to get all the advantages on his side, and seldom entered into a conflict without arranging it so that his antagonists would have very little show for their money, to use the mountain phrase; but in this case he had been beaten right at his own game, and there was nothing left for him but to accept the offer.

Despite his hatred for Talbot—despite his desire to possess the beautiful girl—it is extremely doubtful if he would have dared to engage such a successful duelist as Captain Dick Talbot in single fight if he could have avoided it, for the prestige that clung to Talbot was quite enough to make even a better man in every way than the postmaster hesitate. But, now he had no alternative.

Boldly then and with an air as though he courted the conflict he accepted the proposal.

"That suits me exactly!" he exclaimed. "Your life against mine, and the victor to take the girl."

"That is agreeable, although, miss, by the way, we haven't consulted you about the matter," Talbot replied, turning to the girl.

"I am content," she answered, instantly. "You will conquer this villain, I am sure of it, and I do not fear to have my fate hang upon the issue."

The confident speech fairly made the angry blood of Brockford boil in his veins, but with a great effort he endeavored to remain calm. He understood perfectly well that he needed all his coolness and self-possession in the coming contest and that it would be only the height of folly to allow his temper to get the best of him.

"Come! we are wasting time!" he exclaimed. "Let us get to work as soon as possible. Which ever way the thing ends the quicker it is over the better!" the postmaster exclaimed.

"What weapons do you choose?"

"Rifles, revolvers and knives," Brockford answered. "We'll commence at long range, a single shot apiece, then advance with our pistols if the first fire does not settle the matter, and finish the affair hand-to-hand."

"That suits me."

It was not a hard matter to please Injun Dick in an arrangement of this kind; he did care a button how particulars were arranged so long as his adversary did not attempt to take any unfair advantage.

"Oh, it does me good to see things fixed up so quick and ship-shape!" Bowers asseverated. It was a complete impossibility for the bum-mer to keep quiet when there was anything of this kind going on. "That's the finest old kind of a moon, and it really ought to be a satisfaction for a gentleman to cash up his checks on such a night as this. And we'll see you decently 'planted' too, pard," and he addressed his conversation directly to Brockford, who scowled angrily in return, a proceeding which did not worry the irrepressible vagabond in the least. "Oh, we'll do the fair thing by you, and if it will be any satisfaction to you I'll howl a hymn over your carcass myself."

Brockford was too enraged to make any reply; besides, he was wise enough to know, despite his anger, that it would only be the height of folly to waste words upon such a man as Bowers, and so he addressed his conversation directly to Talbot:

"Let us get to work at once!"

"Proceed, sir," replied Talbot, courteously, moving away from the door so as to allow the Black-hoods to pass. He did not attempt to take the lead himself, for he had not the least bit of faith in the fellows, and he did not intend to give them any chance to assail him treacherously from the rear.

The outlaws understood what Talbot meant well enough, and with ill grace they filed out from their underground retreat. Talbot and his men followed, Daily and his daughter bringing up the rear.

The old man was terribly weak; the fearful ordeal through which he had passed had been too great a strain upon his nervous system and it was quite plain that the veteran sport was not long for this world.

Leaning heavily upon his daughter's arm he tottered forth into the air, so little of life left in him that he hardly comprehended that, upon the issue of the struggle, the fate both of himself and his daughter depended.

The moon was up good and full now—one of those glorious moons that make the night almost as light as day.

The little open glade which surrounded the old log hut was just about big enough to serve for such an encounter as was impending.

The particulars of the fight were soon arranged. The men were to stand at the ends of the open space, about two hundred paces apart, remain there until the word was given, and then advance and give battle. They were restricted to a single rifle-shot apiece, but were at liberty to empty their revolvers, and then to close in with their knives.

Talbot smiled when Brockford laid stress upon this point, for he saw quite plainly that the postmaster really knew very little about him. In no contest yet of his remarkably adventurous life had Injun Dick, when contending with a single man, ever had cause to discharge

all the shots in his revolver; a single bullet had generally proved fatal.

The postmaster had selected rifles first because he was a very excellent shot; and, too, he had never heard of any exploits of his antagonist wherein a rifle had figured. In all of Talbot's achievements the pistol had been the weapon, and therefore Brockford reckoned that it was possible that as a rifle-shot Talbot was not perfection.

The two antagonists took their places, the Black-hoods grouped themselves on one side of the clearing, Bowers and the Indian, in company with old Daily and the girl, on the other. The word was given.

One—two—three—fire!

According to the arrangement, the rifles were to rest with their butts on the ground until the command to fire was given; then the quickest man was the best fellow.

Hardly had the word escaped from Bowers's lips when both rifles leaped simultaneously to the shoulders of the men; both expert marksmen, they wasted no time in aiming, and the two hammers fell with a single click.

And both rifles missed fire.

A hundred times this might have been tried without the same result, for these service rifles upon which, in the far Western wilds, a man's life often hangs, are generally to be depended upon.

"Bah!" cried Talbot, casting the weapon aside and drawing his revolver.

Then came Brockford's chance; he pretended to examine the weapon to discover the cause of the mishap, but in reality improved the opportunity to slip a fresh cap upon the nipple, and quickly brought the weapon up to his shoulder again.

"Come! are you ready?" he said, taking deliberate aim at Talbot, who, armed only with a revolver and out of range, was clearly at a terrible disadvantage.

"Hold on!" Dick cried, in amazement; "you have already had your shot!"

"Oh, no, the cap missed fire."

"But a miss counts as a fire!"

"Oh, no, it does not! The agreement was a single shot! I have not had a shot yet."

"Hold on then until I get my weapon and put on a fresh cap!"

"Oh, no!" Brockford cried, in triumph. "I have you foul now, and I don't intend to give up the advantage that I have gained! You threw away your weapon of your own accord, so now prepare for death."

"Oh, you infernal skunk!" yelled Bowers, in hot indignation.

All this passed much more rapidly than I can relate it, and with a deadly aim Brockford pulled the trigger, but another hand was on another trigger, and the postmaster's action was anticipated by a similar one a second sooner, and seconds in this world sometimes make a wonderful difference.

A tiny ball, not bigger than a pea, came whistling through the air, a little puff of white smoke curling up on the faint breeze of the night from behind a stunted pine tree, not ten paces from where the postmaster stood, revealing the spot from whence it came.

The ball struck Brockford fairly between the eyes, and penetrating to the brain killed him almost on the instant.

His rifle was discharged just as the ball struck him, but the convulsive start which, perforce, he gave destroyed his aim, and so proved Talbot's salvation.

Brockford tottered for a moment, and then the gun dropping from his nerveless fingers he tumbled forward on his face, no longer a bold, reckless man, full of wild, fierce passions, but a mere mass of helpless clay.

The shot was a surprise to all, and in amazement they stared at the pine tree from behind which the fatal dart had come.

Then out from the shadow stepped a slight form, clutching a little silver-mounted revolver in hand, from the muzzle of which the smoke was still curling.

The new-comer was dressed like a boy—looked like a boy, but in truth it was the wild girl who had such bitter cause to hate the scheming postmaster.

"I have avenged myself!" she cried. "I told him that I would kill him if he didn't do what was right!"

All recognized her then. It was Nic, of the Bella Union.

CHAPTER XXXVIII. A STRANGE BEQUEST.

For a few moments the actors in the strange scene looked at each other in astonishment.

Talbot was the first to speak.

"Well, gentlemen, your chief is dead, although not by my hand, but I guess you are all willing to bear witness that I had nothing to do with the matter, although he really deserved to meet death as he did, for he was striving to take an unfair advantage of me."

"It was my act, and I alone planned it!" Nic exclaimed, promptly. "I followed you from Cinnabar, Miss Daily, for I had an idea that mischief was afoot and that this villain would have a hand in it," and she pointed scornfully

at the dead man. "If any one is to be called to an account it is I, and I am not afraid."

"Oh, I'll take that trouble off your shoulders, miss!" Talbot said, promptly. "And, gentlemen, if any of you feel aggrieved about this matter, I stand ready to give you all the satisfaction in my power."

The Black-hoods shook their heads in a most decided manner, and the tall Yankee took it upon himself to act as spokesman for the rest.

"We are very much obliged to you, sir," he said, "but I reckon that there ain't any of us hankering arter a difficulty with you. We are satisfied to call it square if you are."

"You must leave this part of the country, you know."

"Sartin; we'll git up and dust, right away; we don't keer to take a hand in the game if you are going to be counted in."

"This dead man was your chief?"

"You bet!"

"I want you to sign a statement in regard to that, and also one that, in consideration of my giving you your lives, you will leave California, never to return."

"I'll fix it right away, for I reckon that I kin sling a pen with the best of them."

And the fellow was as good as his word.

He told where ample evidence could be found in the underground retreat of the outlaws to prove that Brockford had not only been the chief of the gang, but the originator and the controlling spirit of it in every way.

This was exactly what Talbot wanted, for upon this evidence he relied for his pardon from the Governor.

"And now that this leetle business is finished, I s'pose you hain't got no more use for us?"

"No; you are free to depart."

"Arter we git on our hosses I'll agree that you sha'n't see our heels for dust!" the road-agent assured.

"So-long!" the outlaws cried in chorus, and then they departed, glad to get off so easily.

The death of Brockford was the destruction of the band, for the Black-hoods could not hope to hold together and pursue a successful career without his leadership.

Not alone was it his courage and skill that made the band successful; but from his positions in the town as postmaster and express-agent, he naturally had splendid opportunities for getting information of rich booty to be gained by attacking certain coaches, as well as of all the measures taken by the authorities to hunt down or to entrap the road-agents.

But now, thanks to Injun Dick, the terrible band was dispersed and destroyed. Surely he had earned his pardon if any man ever did, since he had accomplished what all the sheriffs and vigilantes had failed to do.

Daily had grown so weak that he had been unable to stand, and was evidently growing weaker and weaker every moment. With the departure of the road-agents the unnatural excitement which had kept him up abated and he became quite exhausted. Assistance in his case had arrived too late.

"Oh, come quick, please!" Cassandra cried, in terror: "I fear that my father is dying."

They all at once hurried to the side of the helpless man.

Talbot, to whom long years of experience had imparted a wonderful knowledge in such cases, saw that the old man's life could be spanned now by minutes, not by hours.

"Oh, tell me, is there any hope?" the weeping girl cried.

Talbot shook his head.

He could not bring himself to deceive the girl, for he felt sure that ten minutes more was all that the father had left of life.

"Miss, your father is very near death's door," he replied, softly. "The experience through which he has passed has been too much for a man of his age and constitution. Compose yourself to meet the event, for he is even now passing away."

The girl's tears flowed afresh, and some of them falling upon the face of the old man seemed in a measure to revive him.

He opened his eyes and looked around him, a faint smile upon his face.

The girl believed that this was a good sign, but Talbot, who was a better judge, understood that it was but the final flicker of life's candle before its utter extinguishment.

"Well, we're all right, ain't we?" he murmured, faintly. "That infernal scoundrel was beaten in the last deal, after all, but I've trumped my last trick, I'm afraid. Don't cry, Cassy, dear; a man can't live always, you know." And then his eyes wandered from the face of his daughter to the resolute features of Injun Dick.

"Well, partner," he said, with a smile and a nod, "you came in strong on the home stretch, eh? You held too many cards for the scamp, eh? I'm sorry that I'm going to peg out so soon. I wanted to try your metal at a quiet game of poker; I'm not much of a player, you know, but very lucky."

And as he gave utterance to the expression which had led the Cinnabar card-sharps on to utter discomfiture, he smiled shrewdly.

"You're a good man, they say, but I'm on meeky that—" and then for a moment his mind

began to wander, and he imagined that he was again at a card-table. "No, sir!" he said, quite strongly, "you needn't search me; you won't find any cards up my sleeve or down in my boot. No one but a bungler tries that; a man who knows his business uses his fingers, and can fix the papers to suit himself. Not that I know anything about it; I'm not skillful, only lucky! Aces scarce! Not a bit of it! You've got two in your lap; your partner's got another on the floor, and I've got the last on the bottom of the pack," and he chuckled low.

'Twas about his last effort; with a convulsive gasp, he turned his eyes upon Cassandra's face, consciousness again returning.

"Cassy, I'm going," he murmured, faintly. "I can't stock the pack against death. He will have his trick every time; but you won't be alone. Talbot, you're a man—a brother; you promised me once that you'd look out for my little girl. Take her now; she's yours—she's young, fresh-hearted—she has never loved anybody in all her life except her poor old father, and she'll learn to love you in time. Oh, this life! We struggle and toil, and when we win, the game ain't worth the candle."

And then the old man closed his eyes and his soul took its flight to that unknown region where peace dwells and love abideth.

A few more words and our tale is done.

In Cinnabar City Talbot produced the body of Brockford much to the surprise of everybody, and proved that he was the chief of the dreaded Black-hoods, and this time the Governor was as good as his word; and, once again armed with his pardon, Talbot dared to walk forth in his own proper person without fear of any sheriff in California.

Relieved of all apprehension, Talbot took an early opportunity to have an explanation with the beautiful Cassandra. He had taken a great liking to the charming girl; he did not own even to himself that it was love, for his heart was too seared by the bitter memories of the past, he believed, for it ever to throb under the influence of the tender passion again.

He waited upon the girl to know where she wished to reside and to learn what her plans were for the future.

But he at once discovered that she depended wholly and entirely upon him.

Heart-free was she when first she encountered Talbot; but now she could not with truth say that such was the case; she had learned to love the bold man who held his life so lightly and who so readily put it in peril for others.

It did not take the two long to understand each other, and Talbot felt once again that he had something to live for in this world.

"Are you willing to link your fate with mine, and follow my fortunes, desperate enough, perhaps, they may be, through the world?" he asked.

"My father gave me to you, and if you accept the trust I am content," she replied, with all a woman's faith in her young, first love.

"Be it so. I accept the trust, and be our fortune good or ill, in the future, we'll share it together."

And so we leave the man of many fortunes free once more, and blessed with the love of a noble girl.

But—Fate buffets with a merciless hand, and that she was not content to let bold Injun Dick rest in peace it must remain for some future work of our pen to narrate.

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